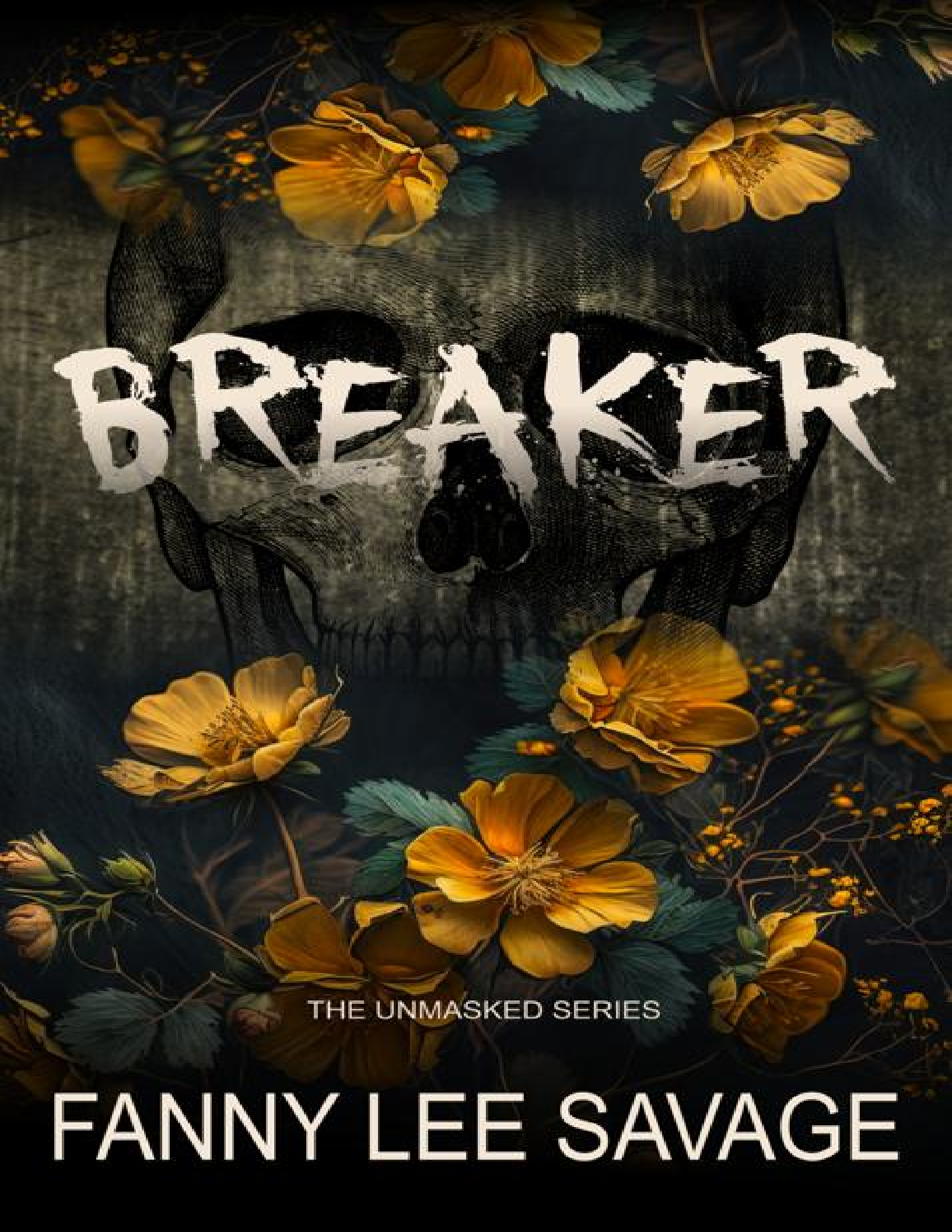
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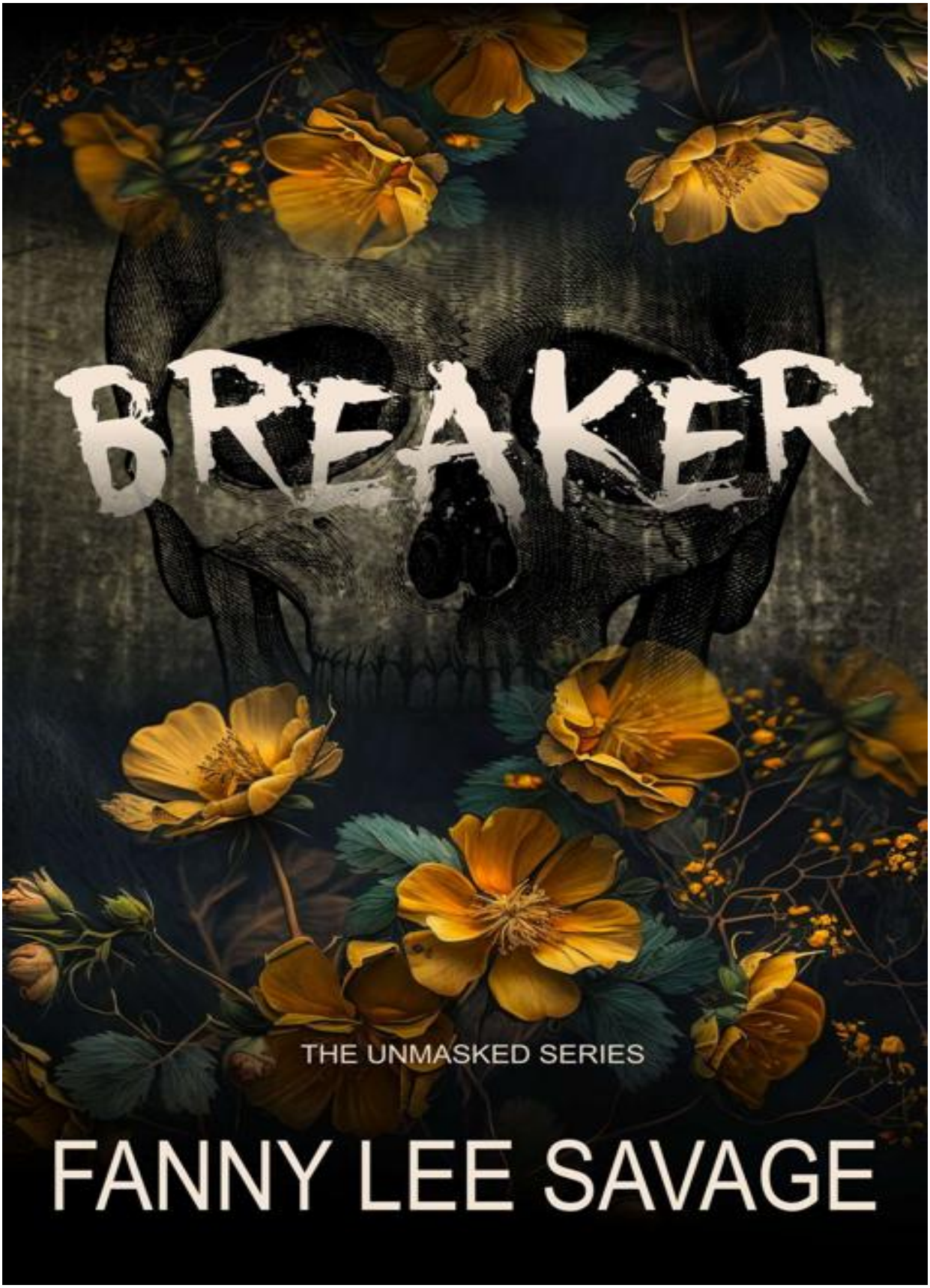
THE UNMASKED SERIES
FANNY LEE SAVAGE


BREAKER
THE UNMASKED SERIES
FANNY LEE SAVAGE

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Breaker

The UnMasked Series #3

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For all you girls (and boys) who need to be reminded…
Your life is what you decide, and no one else.
Even if it means you have to be a monster to achieve it.

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And if that life you create involves getting tied to a bed and railed by a masked man, then so be it.

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Content Warning

Here we are yet again. Another page dedicated to listing triggers and pure debauchery.

Breaker's book is a tough read. It's not all jagged edges and gritty vibes like Striker. This book bleeds. Breaker is precise. He earned his name. Remember that moving forward.

While I have promised that non-con/SA was not a part of this series (meaning our boys would never push their girls that way) there are a few scenes in this book that are disturbing. I do my best to make sure they are written in a way that is age appropriate for the characters, but also stays true to the story.

If you've gotten this far, you know the threat that is waiting in these pages.

That said, this story is dark. We go to some pretty terrible places in this book, but I promise you I handle it carefully.

With that said, here's your dark and dirty menu:

Themes:

Dark romance, mafia, friends to lovers, bi-awakening, why-choose/poly, military, trauma bonding, forbidden, forced proximity, masked men, biker men.

Content Warning:

Graphic violence

Graphic sexual content

Sexual abuse is discussed and portrayed to a point.

Gore/blood

Thoroughly detailed sexual content including scenes with MMF, MM, and MF sexual encounters, BDSM themes, DP, breath play, and various kinks: breeding/bondage/spanking, cream-pie cleanup to name a few.

Detailed medical trauma

Corporal punishment

Extremely detailed violence/torture
Detailed use of weapons/firearms
Praise/degradation
Bi-awakening
PSTD/Dissociation/OCD

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Playlist

Bush – Machinehead
SYML – The Dark (Sparse)
Mehro – Who Are You
Rosenfeld – I Want To
Sleep Token – alkaline
OMIDO – Please
One True God – Kill Me With Your Love
Paris Paloma – The Fruits
Isabel LaRosa – Eyes Don't Lie
Isabel LaRosa – Favorite (Sped-up)
Ari Abdul – Babydoll
Mehro – Monster
Michael Kiwanuka – Cold Little Heart
Rosenfeld – Do It For me
DPR IAN – Limbo
SYML – I Was Stone
Sleep Token – Give
Julia Alexa – Please Hold Me
Camylio – Dusk till Dawn
Camylio – High, High, High…
SYML – Take Me Apart
Black Match – Nowhere
Of Monsters and Men – Destroyer
Shaya Zamora – Unveil
Egypt Central – White rabbit
In this Moment – Whore
Fleurie – Love and War
Letdown – Empty

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Glossary

Otets – Father: Russian
Syn – Son: Russian
Soldat – Soldier: Russian
Mo Leannan – Sweetheart: Scottish Gaelic
Madadh-ruadh – Red Fox: Scottish Gaelic
Mo ghràdh – My love: Scottish Gaelic

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Chapter 1

Breaker

THE DAY I MET Fallon was the day I lost my father. He walked away, leaving me in the yard, my small boots already dirty with the things I'd later do, not knowing I wouldn't see Father again for many years.

Not until the day we buried his son.

Or what remained of him.

To this day, I'm unsure which man was real. Commander Fallon—cold, ruthless, eyes devoid of all emotion, so icy blue it's like looking into a frozen wasteland, nothing below the surface but jagged rocks and dead things.

My *otets*. Father. Mr. Byrns. The man who smiled and tucked me into bed the nights he stayed late. My father who placed puzzle pieces on the table for me to fit together, or softly corrected me as he taught me his mother's language. He would pat my head and tell me how proud he was that I could say the words, and my chest would swell with happiness.

Foolish kid that I was. I didn't know that behind his impeccable three-piece suits and charming smiles he was hiding the devil himself. I didn't know it was the devil I so desperately wanted to please. Before I knew what he was capable of. Before I knew he wore two faces.

Fallon and Father.

Although it was Father, not Fallon, who buried his son.

The day we placed Hunter into the earth, the world was painted too vividly, the sun so bright overhead it was nearly blinding. As I watched

Fallon fall to his knees before Hunter's open grave, the earth shone evergreen, the sun so warm and alive it burned my eyes. Or maybe it was the tears that refused to flow.

All that bright color felt like a betrayal to what was inside my chest. A cavern of emptiness, an inky darkness that felt like it was bleeding out of me, soaking into the soft green grass, staining it with pain.

I remember wondering as his legs gave way, if what Father felt then was remorse. I wondered too if what made him crumble was the agonizing realization that he was the reason his son was dead. The reason there were just pieces of the man we all loved in the casket.

I don't have to wonder anymore what that type of pain feels like. I feel it right now, like a thousand tiny slivers of sharp metal shards stabbing what's left of my heart, letting rage leak into the room around me.

Anger at myself. At All of us.

And rage feels better than guilt.

Delilah's screams scrape through me, and I look at Reaper. He feels it too. This cleaving in half. Yet another piece, something we've just admitted we've wanted, craved, desired, needed for years, someone we've claimed as ours, taken from us.

Because of him.

Fallon. Father.

I've never hated him before. Not even as he took the belt to us, or when he shoved me in solitary. Not even the day I was named, when he told me it was okay to break things. No. I have never hated father for turning us into soldiers.

But I think I hate him now.

And this hatred is deep, boiling inside me a with red, fiery heat. Like a corrosive acid, eating away at all thoughts until it's all just violence in my head.

"No one takes what's ours." My voice doesn't sound like mine. I don't feel like me. I feel like the man Fallon created. The soldier. The Breaker. The *syn* who destroys frail bones and soft skin in order to quench the insatiable thirst of the thing that lives inside me. The dark creature that Fallon created. The thing he fed.

Behind me, Striker kneels, watching as the past and present collide, forced to relive the day we had to leave a huge portion of ourselves behind to save another. The day we sacrificed Hunter and left him with Rune.

Except we aren't leaving. We're sending her away, directly into his arms, knowing acutely what he's capable of.

My fingers tighten in my gloves, curling into a fist.

"Why?" I hear myself asking.

It's silent now. I've been standing so long, watching the dark night sky, so lost in thought that I didn't hear them leave. I glance around the empty foyer, almost in shock that they're no longer here. That they somehow got our tiny girl off the floor and took her away.

I whirl around, eyes scanning the second-floor balcony and the dimly lit hallway that leads to the dining room. My heart races as I search for her, holding on to the doorknob tightly to keep myself upright.

We did this. I can blame Fallon all I want, but we still did this.

"The code," Fallon says, and I snap my head over to him. He's leaned against the wood doorway leading to the library, arms crossed, smug satisfaction oozing from him.

Bastard.

"Fuck the code," I snarl, turning to face him fully. I wonder how long he's been standing there, observing like he always does. Scheming. Planning. Taking in our every move like a chess player and storing it away for later use.

Instead of learning from his mistakes, he's grown colder.

If that is even possible.

Fallon is icy meanness, and he uses everything he sees as a weapon. It doesn't matter who you are. Family or foe, he manipulates those around him to get what he wants. We defied him and instead of supporting us, battling this fucking deal Rune made with Zane, he's spitefully taking her away to punish us.

Fallon quirks a brow, adjusting his suit. Always in control. Always so self-righteous.

I hate the thought he saw Striker so dismantled. Delilah so heartbroken. Reaper feeling so fucking guilty. I don't care if Father sees me weak. He's seen me strong and seen me cry. He's seen me terrified and changed my sheets when I wet the bed as a small boy. But I hate that he's seen my brothers so devastated. He doesn't deserve to see their softer sides, not when he's never given them any of his.

"We must abide by it," Fallon says, head tilting slightly to the side, like he's gauging my reactions. Out of all of us, I'm the only one he can

read like a book.

“You’ve never given a damn about any *code*.“ I don’t know when I moved forward, or how my fingers curled into the lapel of Father’s jacket so tight my gloves creak, but I know when Fallon’s perfect dark gray brow quirks upward, my heart beats like a thundering drum, and my stomach somersaults, churning with that old slick sensation.

Fear.

I drop my hand and step back.

His features contort in a way I’ve never seen before. Something similar to disgust. “You fucked her.” It’s not a question.

My gaze falls to the floor, heart skipping. Whenever Father curses, he somehow makes the word sound even more crass.

Fucked.

Like what we shared was crude. Immoral. Something dirty and not…

“When I said do with as you please, that’s not what I meant.” The sound he makes in his throat makes my gaze dart to his. Something flares behind his eyes, turning his features hard. Accusatory. “I taught my son better than to force himself on a woman.”

“She was willing,” I growl. Father doesn’t know what I discovered in his office that day we broke in looking for the red file. What Viper and Striker and I found in those files he kept on all of us. That my mother was raped and gave birth to me when she was only fifteen years old, and that I was born from hatred and put in this world only thanks to her.

“Was she, son? You were holding her against her will. Did you once stop to think she spread her legs for you in fear, so you’d not hurt her?” A slick, cruel smile pulls up the corner of his mouth, and the urge to punch him makes my hand jerk. “Consent is crucial, but so is the reason for giving it.”

A laugh erupts out of me, shocking us both with its anger. “What the fuck do you care about consent? Isn’t that what you ordered us to do? Take away choices? Turn Delilah against her father, by *any* means?”

“Even I have limits,” Father says, stepping toward me. Age has taken none of his height or lessened the intimidating glare we’re all so used to seeing. It’s only added to his stern, militant stature. The silver hair, no longer deep black, only heightens his features, making him look dignified and even more handsome.

“Do you?” I snap. “Because I have yet to see them.”

How dare he talk about consent? None of us could give consent to be taken to the school. Even I was too young to understand before I was sent there. We all were. I've always, always been careful when I touch someone. The fact he's implying that I forced Cora makes my stomach knot grossly.

I rip my gloves off, tossing them toward the bottom of the stairs, worry, fear, fucking *hatred* for myself and Father, eating at my gut, then pull my mask off, tucking it in my back pocket. A dull pain throbs in my head. I roll my shoulders, trying to ease the tension building inside, and glance upwards to the second-floor landing.

I need to find Striker. He must be devastated to relive that day with our sweet Little Red.

Fallon stops a foot in front of me, looking me directly in the eye. Ice blue on ice blue. "I taught my *syns* that—"

"Your *syns*," I hiss the word out, lacing it with venom. I continue, anger making me lose all reason, not caring about the consequences of talking back to the man who's controlled my entire life, "Because that's what we are, aren't we? Your sins. Your dark, dirty secret. We're your greed and hunger for power, for fucking wealth, in human form."

Father's jaw tics, eyes narrowing slightly at my outburst. I'm surprised that he clamps his mouth shut instead of barking out an order for me to remain silent. It's not that I don't fear him, he scares the shit out of me, but I'm no longer that boy in the school. I may still be his soldier, but I'm still *me*. The same boy who rebelled against orders and only followed them out of fear for my brother's safety, not just my own. But I grew into a man who talks back and speaks my mind.

Who breaks rules and codes. Who Father says is just like him.

His favorite *syn*.

"Or do you not like that I gained their trust and respect without invoking fear?" I step closer, feeling my mouth twist into a vicious grin, mirroring his own. "Because that's the only way you could ever gain ours."

"Cruelty doesn't suit you, boy," Fallon says.

My laugh is sharp, cutting my throat. "Cruel is exactly what you taught me to be."

Except with them. Not even Reaper could be as cruel as Fallon intended. How cruel he instructed. We were supposed to train her in the harsh way we were. Take her loyalty. Pull it from her as violently as Father

did ours. Yet every moment we faced the task, we craved more than her loyalty.

We craved her.

Both of them, and it made all the years, and all the plans become meaningless.

“For god’s sake, boy. Both of them?” he asks.

My eyes snap to his. He searches my eyes, his brows knit, as if everything they mean to us is written on my face. Like he can see everything we’d hoped, everything we’d dream.

“You fucked Gavin’s daughter as well?” He curses quietly under his breath, disgust marring the word and turning it even more foul. “So now my soldier, my *son*, is a sexual deviant.“ His eyes turn cold and my gaze drops. “Viper is depraved in his lust for flesh, but I expect better from you.”

I want to ask what the fuck he means by calling Viper depraved, but I swallow my words when I see him watching me, waiting for me to react.

To defend Viper.

To give away something he probably suspects.

He mumbles another curse under his breath. “I had hoped the rumors weren’t true.” Reading my expression, he shakes his head, the disappointment on his face obvious. “You think the other families haven’t heard what my soldiers did? What I’ve had to defend? Gavin has footage of you in his club the night before you were ordered to take them.”

Fuck. Of course, Father would find out. Reaper insisted we go to the club, have them, let Gavin see how weak he was, and has been this entire time. That we could take anything, at any time, and did we ever.

I just don’t think he expected the girls would take from us, too.

Shoving his hands in his pockets, Father’s head cocks to the side, his eyes boring through my skin, into my very soul. He rocks back on his heels and the move reminds me so much of our days back at the school that my stomach does a flip, making memories of our time there resurface. “Not only did you fuck up my orders and piss off the entire Devin family, an important family, mind you, you caught *feelings* for the daughter of the man who tortured my son.”

My gut twists as my eyes drop to his glossy black shoes. I’m glad I can’t see my face in them. I don’t think I’d like what I see.

“I taught my soldiers that flowery, pretty emotions are a weakness.” Fallon’s tone turns hard. “I taught my soldiers, my sons, respect. Honor.

Tell me, Breaker, is there honor in caring about our enemy's daughter?"

My teeth gnash together, and I refuse to answer.

The rage that my silence creates simmers under his skin, turning his features sharper and colder. Good. He doesn't deserve my respect.

He never has.

I'm a fool that I gave it to him.

Fallon leans in, crowding me, but I don't back down. "I also taught my sons to protect one another at all costs. And yet you keep failing me and each other."

Pain stabs through my chest. It was a low blow, but I keep myself in check, not lashing back like I want to. He blames us for Hunter's death.

I guess denial is easier than guilt.

"We did as asked," I say.

"And you went against my orders, not just once but twice!" Fallon screams, his harsh voice slicing through the quiet foyer so sharply, I wince.

"We accomplished what we set out to do. We have Delilah's cooperation, and—"

He steps back, smoothing his hands down the front of his suit, gathering himself, and I exhale slowly, unfurling my fists. "I never once instructed you to take the Julian girl. I never once told you to *fuck* Rune's daughter."

I lick my lips, trying to settle my stomach. How is it father can make my guts churn with fear, make me feel this sickening shame for something that I know deep in my gut isn't wrong?

"Does Gavin's daughter know?" he asks coldly. "The truth?"

Guilt settles in my gut, making my limbs feel heavy. I shake my head.

He emits another sound, less like laughter and more like disbelief. More like disappointment, and his next words hurt far worse than if he had taken his belt to my bare skin. "She's going to hate you when she finds out."

I shake my head again, as if doing so will keep his words from settling. But it's true. I think we know it. Reaper certainly does. I think that's part of why he's been so fucking tortured. We all see how he is with her. Touching her. Like he has zero control of himself when she's near.

But it's true. When Delilah finds out, she's going to hate him.

All of us.

Fallon's jaw pops as he eyes me. "Did you *all* enjoy her company in this way?"

I grind my teeth, looking him square in the eye.

"Reaper?"

My silence is answer enough.

Fallon lets out a humorless laugh. "I expect this type of behavior from the Julian girl. She's a whore like her mother, but—"

I bolt forward, gripping his jacket and pulling him up to his toes. "You do not call her a single foul word, do you hear me?"

That brow raises again, but he grips by hand in warning. I let him go and step back.

Fallon adjusts his suit, then props his hands on his hips, looking down at his feet, chest deflating on a sigh. I feel like a boy all over again. Fucking things up and waiting for his lecture and the following lashes from his belt.

Instead, he shakes his head and says, "It's my fault. I should have known better than to send four young men to watch them. Of course, you'd get attached. This was bound to happen."

He's right. You can't send four men to stalk two women for so long and not expect them to catch those fucking feelings he tried to remove from us. Yet we did. As much as none of us wanted this, and as much as it makes us vulnerable, we made them a promise. We made them *ours*. Now one of them was ripped from our grasp.

"Breaker." Fallon's soft tone makes my focus snap back to him. He cups my jaw and my heart hammers. Growing up, I never knew if I was getting Father or Fallon when he touched me, but when he smiles, my shoulders relax. "My son. You've always been too sensitive and that it my fault. But the Julian girl—"

"Cora," I tell him. "Her name is Cora."

His features harden as his hand drops. "She isn't up for grabs." Fallon takes a step back. He lifts his chin toward the staircase. "Take care of this mess you've made and make sure Rune's daughter is still willing to cooperate. I don't want this mission compromised because none of you can keep your dicks in your pants."

I take in a lungful, watching his back as he stalks to the door.

Right as he steps through, he turns to face me. "Tell Reaper his obsession is going to cost him one day, and I won't be around to clean it up

next time.”

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Chapter 2

Breaker

23 Years Ago, May, Age 5

TODAY I LEARN HOW to be a soldier. My *otets* said that when I turned five, I was going to leave the little house I live in with Nanny in the village and go to school with my brothers. And today I turn five.

I don't get a gift, not like the other kids in the village, but Nanny made me pancakes and stuffed red, hard candies in my pockets when she sang me happy birthday as she combed out my hair.

"He just pulled up, *gentil garcon*," Nanny says, rushing toward me to make sure my uniform is tidy. She already pressed my gray pants and shirt and made sure my black boots shine.

"I'm ready enough," I tell her, pushing her hands away.

She swats my bottom, and I laugh. I love Nanny. She's not my mom, so Father told me I'm allowed to think she's pretty when I asked. Nanny's pretty because she's not like the other women in the village. She talks

sweetly and has clean hands and pretty dresses. My *otets* always smiles at her, so that must mean she's good. I know she is.

She's been my Nanny my whole life. I love her, even though sometimes she's cross with me when I make a mess or don't do my chores. Or if I get stains on my church clothes, or that one time, I cried so hard I threw up on her favorite dress. But I only did because I was scared when I got stuck in the confessional booth when the door wouldn't open.

Not like Father. He gets cross, but it's only ever about big stuff. Like if I don't say words the right way, or if I don't listen, or don't finish my dinner. There was that one time last month I broke the vase in his big library when he took me to the school for what he said was a tour. He whipped my bottom then, but I know I deserved that lesson.

I broke the vase on purpose, and it was like he knew I did.

Sometimes I get mad and break things. I don't know why. Nanny says there's a monster living in my chest who makes me break rules and talk back, and it's my job to tame him. Funny because I looked and looked and don't know how a monster got in my chest. There's no way for him to get in my body besides through my mouth. I know I would have remembered him crawling down my throat. But maybe she's right. Sometimes I just feel bad inside and don't really know why.

Sometimes I think he got into my chest because of the endless blue Father saved me from. The place my *otets* said he found me. The bad room where it was cold as ice. Because whenever I think about the endless blue, I get that bad feeling in the center of my chest and can't breathe. Like the monster is squeezing my insides, and that scares me even more. Like maybe the monster's going to kill me one day. And all I can picture is a blue monster with black claws and rotted sharp teeth sitting inside me, trying to get out and do bad things.

My otets told me that my real father, the man who made me, was a monster, so maybe that's why I have the badness in me.

"Stop wiggling, *gentile garcon*!" Nanny whisper-shouts. "Mr. Byrns is expecting you to act like a good boy, not a monster."

Fisting my hands at my sides, I keep still as a statue like the *soldats* I saw in the school last month. The tour father gave me was just us walking across the front yard and into his office. He let me look at the books in his library while he talked with Commander Maxim. That's when the gross feeling started. When I was alone, and it was quiet and all I could hear was

my breathing. I didn't like it. I tapped my chest over and over, trying to make noise, like I did in the blue room before Father came for me, but it didn't help. So, I tapped the vase. I liked the idea of it breaking open the way my chest felt like it needed to. So, I pushed it over.

Or the monster did.

That's when Father came in and he whipped my bottom. He said good soldiers didn't give in to temptations like I just did. When I told him I felt like I needed to break it to make myself breathe better, he said *soldats* control those feelings. I felt bad then, but then Father told me if I work hard, and train even harder, I will be a good soldier. Maybe even the best because I've had him as my *otets* longer than my brothers.

I haven't met my brothers yet, but I will today.

The sound of a car door slamming outside makes Nanny jump. She pats my cheek and rushes to the little window over the kitchen sink, leaning over the dirty pans and dishes from breakfast to look outside.

Her fingers tighten on the sink edge for a minute like she's really excited, and then she fluffs her hair. Nanny always gets so nervous when Father comes to visit. She messes with her hair and pinches her cheeks. I want to tell her she's pretty and that Father will still like her even if she doesn't pinch her cheeks to make them pink, but the last time I did her whole face turned red and she told me to be quiet about things I didn't understand.

"Put your dishes in the sink, *gentile garcon*," she tells me, straightening the hem of her yellow dress with blue flowers all over it. Nanny glances toward the foyer. "And be sure to answer all Mr. Byrns' questions respectfully."

"Yes, Nanny," I say as the doorbell chimes. Then I hear the front door open and close. Nanny scurries out of the kitchen. I open my mouth to tell her not to run, but I clamp it shut and turn to my plate.

Before I can pick it up and put it in the sink, I hear my *otets* behind me.

"*Gentile garcon*," he coos. Forgetting I'm not supposed to run inside, I turn and sprint to him, wrapping my arms around his waist, but he doesn't get cross. He just peels me off and sets me back. Father leans down, hands on his thighs and smiles. "Are you ready for your first day at the school?"

"Yes, sir," I tell him, my belly feeling all squiggly like happy caterpillars are dancing inside me when he nods his approval, and I see

Nanny smile behind him. “I’m ready to learn to be a good *soldat*.”

Father touches my hair as he stands upright, still smiling. “You’re a good boy,” he says. “And to be a good soldier means you have to leave your past behind. Do you understand?”

I don’t. But I nod and grin, because I like it when Father smiles at me. He always does if I smile first. He says my smile is infectious, which I think means he’s catching my smile like a stomach bug.

“Emilia, get the scissors and the clippers.”

I don’t know why Nanny starts crying, but she does. “Do you have to?” she asks, wiping her eyes. “His hair is so pretty.”

Father casts her that mean look he gets when someone doesn’t listen, making me wonder if he’s got a monster, too. “Emilia, get the scissors.”

“Yes, sir,” she says and scurries away.

Father points to the center of the kitchen. “Stand there, son.”

“Yes, sir,” I say and do my best to keep still when Nanny returns and hands him scissors, then sets the clippers on the table. Father grips one of my curls and pulls it straight. The sound of metal slicing through my lock makes my stomach sick. Like when I sneak extra cookies and then my belly groans and churns.

Father takes another lock and pulls it straight, then cuts again.

That bad feeling returns, not in my stomach, but in my chest. The monster. I want to kick Father’s shin to make him stop cutting my locks off because I like my hair. No one else in the village has hair like mine. Nanny uses oils that smell like almonds and smokey wood, along with a comb at night to keep my locks clean and untangled. Now father is chopping them away, and it makes my chest feel tight and angry. The monster in me wants to break free and break the scissors.

So, I do.

I grab the scissors and drop them to the ground, using my new boots to smash them, but they’re metal and don’t break. Nanny gasps. When I look up, I see Father’s ice eyes watching me in a way that makes my legs feel like running and me feel like hiding.

Instead of taking the belt to my bottom like he did when I broke the vase, Father picks up the scissors without a word and cuts my hair again.

“Do you remember the story of the day I rescued you?”

My lip trembles as another black curl hits the green and white tiles by my boots. “Yes, *otets*.”

“Tell me then,” Father says.

“You saw me in a blue room. I was cold and hungry. I had sunken cheeks and tears and snot and looked so sad that you knew you had to rescue me.”

“And I did,” Father says. “I unlocked the door and let my son out of that room.”

My eyes follow as another lock hits the floor. My belly squiggles, but not in a happy way.

“And I told my new son he was going to be a soldier. He was going to be my best son. You. You were going to grow up and go to school and learn from me.”

I nod, my finger tapping my thigh like it will stop the tight feeling that’s growing in my chest again as he pulls another lock. The snipping sound *snips* through my chest and more hair falls.

“Do you remember why I chose you?” Father asks, setting the scissors down on the table next to my empty breakfast plate. He leans down, propping his hands on his thighs to look into my eyes. “Why I rescued you?”

I rip my eyes from the plate, wishing I’d had enough time to clean up before Father got here. He doesn’t like messes when he comes to visit. “Because looking at me was like looking in a mirror.”

Father taps his cheek, right under his eye. He stands upright and Nanny hands him the clippers she uses to shave Fallon’s hair sometimes. The click followed by the buzz of the motor makes my heart jump. The cold metal teeth scrap my scalp and more hair falls in short clumps. Father runs it over my head, shaving it clean like the sides of his hair.

When he turns the clippers off, my body jolts at the sudden quiet.

“Why tears?” Father says, brushing clumps of hair from my gray uniform. “It’s just hair, my son.”

I shake my head, swiping at my wet cheeks. He doesn’t understand. Everyone in the village looks like Father. I’ve only ever seen a few delivery drivers or the girls from the traveling gypsy vans with hair like mine. I like having different hair. It makes me feel special, like Father says I am, but now that it’s gone, so I won’t be anymore.

Father squeezes my shoulder and leads me to the small sitting room. When we reach the fireplace, he picks me up so I can see my face in the mirror with the gold frame. I blink, taking in the sight of my shaved head. It

gleams, the bright morning light coming through the open curtains, making my scalp look like smooth polished wood.

I run a finger over my bald head and Father smiles.

“I don’t look like me,” I tell him as tears leak down my cheeks.

“You look just like your *otets*,“ Father says. He holds up his hand. “See? I have five fingers, like you.”

I glance at his fair skin and long fingers, then hold up my hand next to his, palm facing the mirror.

“See, son? Five fingers and two arms and legs, a mouth, and nose, and two eyes.” Father hikes me up higher. “And I see my son’s eyes that look just like his father’s.”

My light blue eyes meet his in the mirror. Father always does this when I tell him someone from the village says something about me looking different. He’ll hold me up in front of the gold mirror and tell me we are the same. That we have the same number of fingers and toes. That we have arms and legs, and if we get cut, we bleed red, and if anyone ever tries to tell me differently, I punch them in the gut. Father always pretends to hit my stomach when he says this and I always laugh, which I think may be infectious too because he laughs with me. He never mentions we don’t have the same skin, just that we have the same eyes, silvery blue, he says, like ice over a lake on a bright winter morning.

Now that I don’t have my hair, I can see that I look like my *otets*.

We have the same eyes.

I smile at him in the mirror, and he smiles back, showing white teeth just like mine.

Father sets me down. He grips my hand and pulls me to the door. “Come, my new *soldat*. Let’s meet your brothers.”

Nanny cries as we walk through the door, and I want to hug her, but Father won’t let me.

“Soldiers don’t need hugs and kisses, my son.”

When we reach the shiny black car, Commander Maxim opens the back door and I climb in, making sure not to scrape my boots on the leather seat.

As Maxim drives us to the school, I remember to sit still and not kick my feet against the back of his seat. Maxim gets cross when I do, and Father has to remind him I’m not a *soldat* yet and to be kind. The times he’s said this to Maxim, I always feel sick after because Maxim will look at me

and smile big, like a wolf. But it's not infectious, even though it makes me feel like I have a stomach bug.

As we pull to the front of the school, a loud beep blasts through the open car window and I sit upright, trying to see. The front gate grinds open, and after we pass, it closes, slamming hard enough that my heart punches into my ribs. Like the monster in my chest is excited we're here.

I've only been to the school two times. Last month and then right after father rescued me, but I barely remember that day. I just remember the color blue. Blue like the chipped paint on the statues at church where the nuns teach me how to talk like Father, and where Nanny will leave me sometimes when Father comes to visit her and not me. She always says it's to cut his hair, but sometimes he doesn't look any different, so I think they may be secretly eating the red candies she keeps under her mattress, and she just doesn't want me to know.

"Are you ready, my *syn*?"

My eyes move from the large lot filled with work trucks and supply crates. "*Oui*," I tell him, but then remember he wants me to speak English like my new brothers, so I say, "Yes, sir."

Father doesn't smile as he opens the car door and waits for me to step onto the dirt ground. When I do, Father leans down and says, "When we are here, in training, I am not your *otets*. I am Commander Fallon. Do you understand?"

I shake my head, then say, "No, sir."

He stands upright and glances around the yard, then back down at me. "You are going to be a soldier now. I cannot be your father and your commander. When we are training or in classes, you call me Fallon."

I nod and tell him I understand, even though it feels weird to lie.

Father, no, Fallon, nods and says, "Once you show us your skill set, you will earn your name."

I frown again. "But my name is Sin."

That makes Father smile. "*Syn* means son. It's something that a father calls his boy. Your name must be earned. It is picked based on your wits, your strengths, and how well it suits your personality."

I nod, but my head is muddled from all his words.

Fa— Fallon turns to Maxim. "Take him to class."

The silky black eye patch gleams, like black water in the sunlight when Maxim turns to me. My skin feels gross, and my legs feel like they

want to run again. They always do when Commander Maxim looks at me. He reminds me of that pirate in the book Nanny reads to me at night.

But I won't get any more silly books read to me now. I'm going to be a soldier.

My boots make loud clomping sounds as I follow Maxim across the yard to the second set of gates. I glance back at Fallon, and wave, but he doesn't wave back. He just turns away and walks toward the other building across the yard. My stomach falls.

"Pay attention," Maxim says. "After today, no one will guide you around the school. It's up to you to remember where to go."

"Yes, sir," I mumble, biting my lip to stop it from trembling. *I will not cry*. Father tells me crying is for weak men and if I'm going to be a soldier, I can't be weak. It doesn't matter that Father didn't say goodbye, even though he always does.

It's hard to focus, but I try my best to remember the way as I follow Maxim. The second gate squeals open and we walk through a dark, wet area that reminds me of a castle doorway before we stop in the middle of another yard. It's a big square, with dirty gray walls that have little dark boxes for windows all lined up, one on top of the other. A set of rusty metal steps is on one side of the yard. I remember Father telling me they were called bleachers. A bunch of wooden crates, stacked taller than me, are on the other side of the square, which isn't really tall, since I'm not. Not yet. Father says I'm going to be tall, and I believe him.

"That's the pit," Maxim says, slipping back to using the coarse words Father uses sometimes, which I have a tough time understanding. He points to the circle at the center of the yard. I know it's called the pit because Father told me last month. "You'll learn to fight there when you're older." He points to the wall with all the windows. "That's the sleeping quarters." He lifts his chin to the black open doorway on the opposite side. "That's the school." When he points to the blank wall with only one doorway, he says, "That's everything else."

"Yes, sir," I tell him, and follow as he leads me through the doorway he said takes us to the classrooms.

As soon as we step into the building, a gross feeling settles in my belly. I don't like the way this school looks. Father didn't take me to this part of the school last month, so I never saw the walls are painted blue. The color blue I don't like.

Before I can start feeling too sick, Maxim opens a door, places his hand on my back, and shoves me through. The door clicks loudly when he closes it behind me. I scan the room, and my stomach feels better when I see it's not blue but dusty green, like a tortoise's shell.

A large man, younger than Father with angry eyes, tells the class that I'm going to join them for lessons every day and to take me to the yard for recess.

A big boy with hair the color of embers jumps up from his desk. The metal chair he was in scratches across the tile floor, almost falling over he's in such a hurry to reach me before anyone else.

He stops in front of me and places his hands on his hips. He's older than me and has skin so pale it reminds me of Nanny. He's got a bit of a belly, and some freckles on his cheeks, but his eyes are so pretty I can't stop staring. They're blue and for the first time, I really like the color. They look like the pictures of the satin dresses in the magazines Nanny looks at. She said one day she was going to have enough money to buy the dress that was the color of Marie Antoinette. Blue.

When he smiles, my shoulders relax.

"I'm Viper," he says, scanning me again like Nanny does when she dresses me for church. Like he wants to make sure I'm decent enough to talk to.

"Like the snake?" I ask, scanning him too.

"Like the snake," Viper says, nodding seriously. "Because I'm fast and mean."

Father told me I'd get a name here, something other than Sin. I wonder what it will be. I glance from his blue eyes to his boots, then back to his face. I like his face. "Do vipers have Marie Antoinette eyes too?"

His mouth turns down. His lips remind me of Nanny when she paints hers pink, but then he smiles, and they remind me of the sweet candies she shoved in my pockets. I dig one out, offering it to him. He takes it, inspects it, then puts it in his pocket.

"You're weird," he says. Viper grins again and hooks an arm around my shoulders. I stumble a little but let him lead me to my other brother's. We stop in front of a boy that's not much bigger than me.

I dig out another candy and give it to him.

His brows knit, and he looks from the candy in his hand to me. I see now his eyes are gold. Not shiny like metal things, but hard like the

gemstone in Nanny's necklace. Like he's not sure if he likes me.

"You have eyes like a lion," I tell him.

He cocks his head to the side. "And you have eyes like Fallon's."

"That's because I'm just like him," I tell my new brother, but I don't like the way he frowns at my words.

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Chapter 3

Cora

BETRAYAL SITS BITTERLY ON my tongue. Like the sour cum of a man who lives off lies, sex, and greed, and the only sweet thing he's ever consumed was my innocence.

Bitter like Rune.

Time flies by like someone hit fast forward, images flashing before me, but there are no sounds. Just the *thump*, *thump*, *thumping* pulse of the chopper blades in my head like a heartbeat. The man sitting across from me wears an all-black uniform much like the boys. He's the one who shoved me into the chopper, then buckled me in as we took off. I scowl at him, keeping my arms crossed. He's watching my every move, like he's worried I'm going to start kicking and screaming. Try to open the chopper door and jump.

Fool. I know when to fight, and when to admit defeat.

"Why didn't you let me say goodbye?" I ask him, but he can't hear me over the roar. He should have let me say goodbye. That's all I wanted to do. Wrap my arms around her one last time.

The chopper lands and I'm shoved out the door by the large man. Clyde's sweet face appears, and I notice how his brows pinch when he sees me, but then his features smooth out, putting his mask in place. I wonder if he realizes everyone sees that he's not as cold and hard as he portrays, but the thought's cut off as he grips my arm and tugs me toward Rune's jet.

I barely have time to register that Rune's not here before I'm placed in a seat. Guess he can't be bothered to retrieve his fuck toy. Once I'm buckled in, we take off. Clyde doesn't speak to me the entire flight. He doesn't ask if I'm okay or offer me water. He sits staring out the little window while the jet careens toward home, so I do the same.

Not that I feel like talking.

My heart's too busy breaking.

When we land, he grabs me by the arm again, and we exit the jet. Rune's here this time and my stomach sinks when I see his stern expression, blue eyes fixed on me with a steely gaze.

A mistrusting glare.

No one says a word as we drive to his mansion. We weave through traffic, streetlights flashing through the car like a strobe light. The driver, Conner, occasionally looks at me in the rearview and I wonder what he's overheard.

That I've been returned.

That Rune's enemies took me and held me for three weeks. God knows what sort of stories the staff have come up with, whispering late at night amongst themselves. No doubt about how I've been violated. Beaten. Broken. It's no wonder he keeps looking at me in the rearview.

Little does he know Rune did that to me long ago.

Conner's eyes meet mine again but flash away, back to the road.

If only I could tell them the truth. It's far juicier than the horrors he could imagine.

I *let* them fuck me. Craved it. And I miss them like I miss a limb and I've only been gone a few hours.

Someone's phone rings loudly and I'm snapped out of my thoughts. The phone rings again, but I block out the sound of Clyde and Rune's hushed conversations. The constant tapping of fingers hitting screens fills the quiet car, then the *pop* indicator of incoming messages. Clyde tells Conner something that makes him look at me again. Then the house I grew up in appears, a modern monstrosity on the waterfront. Clyde grips my arm, dragging me from the vehicle, and we move inside.

It all goes by in a blur, and I snap to focus the second Rune says, "Did they touch you?"

I blink, slapped into the present, reality breaking through the haze as I realize this is the first time anyone has spoken to me since I was shoved

into the helicopter. It's just been business, a simple transaction of handing me over, no one caring that my heart is cracking open every time I try to breathe.

That I was forced to leave my best friend behind so I could be here.

Alone.

With a predator.

Rune leans forward in his plush wingback chair, fingers steepling like he always does when he's thinking too hard. His suit's a little rumbled, and his tie is askew. I feel his hard gaze moving like thick oil down my body. Peeling my eyes from the red and gold oriental rug centered in his large opulent office, I meet his blue eyes and my chest squeezes.

Delly got his eyes, not her mother's. But she got nothing else from him. She's beautiful and kind and—

"Answer me."

I lick my lips, my mouth suddenly too dry to speak, and shake my head. "No."

"No?" Rune's voice is too harsh. Too cold.

Too *knowing*.

He bolts up from his seat, stalking toward me, and grips my chin, forcing me to look up at him. Something dangerous swirls in his eyes, and I know I need to tread lightly.

"She said no, Rune," Clyde says from behind me, and I realize he's standing by my chair.

Rune doesn't hear him, or chooses not to, and his grip tightens as he pulls me from my seat, eyes never leaving mine. Something he sees in my face as I stand makes that dangerous gleam grow darker, more sinister.

"Which one?" he asks, and my stomach flips.

My mind races, trying to figure out how he knows, but then I remember when they took us Reaper announced to the entire lobby he'd fucked Delly. After we were taken, Rune no doubt watched the security footage after someone reported we were in his club. Hell, they sent us fucking flowers afterwards, no doubt causing even more gossip.

It must have chewed Rune inside out, knowing they'd had us before they took us. That we'd gone so willingly with them to his private VIP room, wanting to please and be pleased. I'd almost admire their viciousness if I wasn't the one standing here, suffering the consequences.

And suffer I'm about to if I'm not careful.

The mouth I've come to know so well curls into a sneer. "Which one did you fuck?"

One? I'd laugh if I wasn't so scared.

"Papa," I start, as Rune inches in closer, barely a breath between us. His intense glare, eyes never leaving mine, makes my heart stutter. "We didn't know who they were that night."

His jaw pops, hands dropping to fists at his side. He's still so close, so in my face, I can smell his familiar smokey cologne and the hint of whisky on his breath. "You two went with four strange men into that room. Did you even get their names?"

I glance at Clyde for help. Stupid me. His own features harden. Clyde's just as pissed that Delly and I went off with four men and didn't tell a soul.

My cheeks heat, not just from embarrassment that Rune and Clyde know we went so wild that night, but from the thought that his staff knows. "We just gave them nicknames, and that was it."

"Jesus Christ, girl," Clyde snarls. "You know how dangerous that was? We taught you both better than that."

I take a deep breath, daring a look back at Rune.

His throat moves as he swallows, the salt and pepper stubble glistening in the dim light . He's so tense, I don't trust that he won't explode into a fit of rage, even though Clyde's here.

"And they didn't touch you again?" he asks. "After that night?"

God, he's losing his mind at the mere thought the men violated us. Maybe he's more concerned for Delly since he knows what vile things men are capable of. He does them to me all the time.

"Those men, they didn't…" Blue eyes move down the front of my dress. He touches the blue buttons, letting his hand trail down each one until he reaches my stomach. Then he grips the material of the sweater, feeling the soft fabric, running his thumb over the tightly knit threads. His eyes drop to my socked feet, then move slowly back up my body, taking in the cream dress with delicate blue flowers embroidered along the hem.

The violent churning in his eyes intensifies, shadows swirling within them, freezing my blood. Fury pours from him, like he can see all the places they touched. As if their hands left a pattern on my skin detailing all the lascivious things done to me, my body imprinted with fingerprints and kisses, revealing all the places they've been. How I've been cared for, given

affection. How I've fucked not just one of them, but three of them, and his daughter as well.

When his gaze moves up to my face, I swear he can see their promises. The way his face turns hard tells me he can see the heartbreak, too. I just hope he thinks it's from being separated from Delly and not the slivers of pain that were stabbed through my heart when I was handed over to a man with silver hair that scared me far more than Rune ever has.

But he will come and get me.

Reaper promised he'd never let me go. That they would always come for me, and I have to believe this, or I'll go insane. Because I don't know what Rune will do now that he thinks they've had me. Stained me. Perverted my body and maybe even my mind against him.

He leans in, breath hitting my face like acid. "If you spread your legs for them in my club, you'd do it again."

He may as well have slapped me with how harsh his words sting.

"Rune," Clyde growls, stepping close but stops when Rune casts him lethal glare. Clyde clears his throat and says, "She's been traumatized, and she's—"

Rune grips my arms, tugging me forward so roughly that I crash into his chest. With a deadly gleam in his eyes, he says, "Was it the big one? Did you fuck him?"

I'm released and shoved away like I'm too tainted to touch a second longer.

"No, Papa," I say, knowing he means Reaper. The man who, in his eyes, violated his daughter in his place of business.

Rune backs away, running fingers through his hair, gripping it at the roots, pacing in short, rigid steps in front of me.

"Leave her alone, Rune," Clyde says from behind me. "Who she's slept with and when are none of your concern."

I stifle a laugh. Poor Clyde. He has no idea.

"They are sick," Rune says, more to himself. "Those men are sick. Murderers. And they fucking violated my daughter!"

I swallow, tasting the bitterness. Daughter, not daughters. Then again, I'm not his blood. I'm his whore.

Rune rocks his head back and forth, rolling his shoulders, trying to keep himself in check.

Don't want to let Clyde see what you really are, I think.

“Those men do atrocious things,” Rune growls, resuming his pacing. “They’ve been trained to be killers.”

“You know them?” I ask, eyeing Rune. He pauses, slowly pivoting to face me. “You know the men who took us?”

He glances at Clyde. Unease settles in my stomach, realizing he *knows* them. Rune knows the men, and they know him. I was right. It’s more than pride or money that made Rune kill their brother. It’s personal.

The realization hits like a punch to the gut. That’s why they never came for us. They didn’t know where we were, but they knew who had us. I can’t help but wonder if he knows more about them than I do. If he knows the silver-haired man who took me. With the way he’s acting, he has to.

“Was he there?” Rune asks. “Their father?”

My heart thunders, picturing the man Reaper handed me over to. “I only saw him once. Who is he?”

Rune’s features turn to ice. “What did he say to you? Did he touch you?”

“Nothing. And no, he never touched me.”

Rune releases a strange, choked sound. Relief? I can’t tell.

“Where did they keep you?” Clyde asks, derailing Rune from his line of questioning.

Thank god I don’t have to lie anymore. “I don’t know where we were. They put us in a room. We barely saw them.”

“What do you mean?” Clyde asks. “Tell us everything.”

The best lies are the ones closest to the truth. I suck in a breath, closing my eyes like I’m too scared, too traumatized to talk about it. Part of that is true. I may not be traumatized, but I sure is shit am scared.

“They kept us apart,” I say shakily as I open my eyes. Rune’s own narrow and fear slithers through my belly. I don’t know what he knows. They’ve obviously had some sort of communication. At least enough to send word that I was coming back and where to meet to gather me. “For over a week, I think. They gave me food three times a day. I counted how many times, and it added up to nine days.”

“Who?” Rune barks. “The big one?”

He’s really fucking obsessed with Reaper.

I lick my lips and shake my head. “The other three, I barely saw the other one. The big one.” He glances again at Clyde, and I wish I could decipher his expression. I shoot a quick look at Clyde, but he’s watching

Rune, not me. “Then they put me and Delly in a room together and they just fed us, and we rarely saw them.”

“What did they say?” Clyde asks. “Did they say anything?”

“They didn’t talk to us.”

Rune’s face hardens again. “They really told you nothing? None of them said anything about me?” he asks, a dark glint clouding the blue of his eyes.

“No Papa, nothing.” At least that’s not a complete lie. Outside of what Viper told me about Rune killing their brother, I genuinely know nothing. It’s not a surprise Rune ordered someone killed. He has often. Delly’s good at pretending not to see things, but I take it all in. “They just said when they took us it was for revenge.”

My words seem to set his teeth on edge, and he leans forward slightly, pinning me with a glare.

“The big one.” Rune steps forward like if he invades my space, it’ll force the answers he wants to spill from my lips. “The big one said that, right?”

I nod, realizing he may know them, but he doesn’t know who they are. Just what they are.

But he knows the man with the terrifying glare. Their father. Rune knows exactly who he is. That day in the lobby, Rune asked if *he* sent them. He must have been referring to their father, the man Rune feared had come for us. And he did, sending four men to take us from Rune for killing his son.

“Answer me, Cora,” Rune growls.

“When they took us from the lobby,” I confirm.

His throat moves as he swallows. “The night before…” his voice trails off, teeth gnashing together in rage. He can’t stand the thought of Reaper touching Delilah.

There’s a part of me that likes the thought of him thinking Reaper is a rapist like him. But they aren’t. They are murderers, yes. They’re kidnappers, too, using Delilah to seek revenge, and I want desperately to get back to them, so I have to convince Rune to trust me.

“The big one who took you, the one who killed Manuel. He never once spoke to you?” Rune asks, keeping his eyes focused on my face. “None of the others? They never once said anything to you about why you were there?”

I shake my head, not liking how he licks his lips or how he unfurls his fingers, stretching them out as he leans back on his heels. Like he's trying to keep his violence in check. I know it's only because Clyde is here. If he wasn't around, Rune would be less nice with his line of questioning.

There's something about these men, these four, that has him on the verge of madness. Rune may have killed their brother, but I'm thinking he may fear them. I wonder how long ago he ordered their brother killed. Months?

"That's all I know, Papa."

His head tics to the side and my heart punches against my ribcage. He knows I'm lying.

Instead of arguing or drilling me with more questions, Rune stalks in close again, gripping my cheeks with one hand and turning my face side to side, pulling the sweater down and brushing my hair back to look at my neck. Looking for signs I've been violated or hurt, maybe.

No, not hurt. He cares they've touched what he thinks is his.

But he's never said a word before. Not when I went on dates. Not when I know someone reported to him I went home with not one, but two men.

I bite my lip, keeping still as he tugs at my clothes, pulling my sweater off to look at my arms, my fingers. Runs the pad of his thumb over the blue veins in my wrist. He drops to his knees, and lifts my dress, looking at my claves. When he takes my socks off to check my feet, I see it.

The absolute pain in his face mixed with hope.

Hope that if I'm not harmed, Delly isn't either.

My chest squeezes and the tears start.

"Papa," I whisper, touching his jaw.

He looks up at me, and his blue eyes meet mine. God, how I wish he loved me like loves her. I swallow the knowledge he never will, not really. He loves what I provide for him. He loves me in some fucked up way a man should never love a woman, much less the girl he raised. I have to accept that, because I'll forever break my heart if I don't.

"They haven't hurt her," I tell him, touching his cheek. I only do because I know it will stop the madness I see contorting his face from unleashing onto me. "We barely saw them."

His features seem to fracture, like my words stabbed through his hard facade, creating fissures of pain. I blink back tears. From his place on the

floor, kneeling before me, he's just a simple, weak man.

I've seen him weak so many times it shouldn't bother me like it does. Because it's weakness that makes him hurt me. Weakness that he allows himself to be so hateful.

"He's here," Clyde says quietly from next to me.

Rune sucks in air, then stands, gripping my hand and bringing it to his mouth. His soft, warm lips that have been places a father's mouth should never touch, brush my skin. My mind wants to interpret the gesture as loving, maybe even fatherly, but it's mixed up with something a lover would do, and a slithering sensation moves through my gut.

He doesn't love me. He never has, I tell myself, yet again.

I am my mother's daughter.

Rune's features shift yet again and he shuts a down all emotions, slamming it all behind a solid wall of disdain. He grips my hand. "Come," Rune says as he guides me from his office. "Let's get you upstairs."

My chest squeezes, like it does when he leads me anywhere private. Clyde follows us to the foyer, stopping at the foot of the stairs as Rune leads me up to the second floor.

"I don't want to stay here," I say. "I want to go home."

Rune grips my hand, "You are home, Cora. Where you belong."

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Chapter 4

Cora

I THINK I MAY have gone into auto-pilot again. White walls flash past. The marble railing along the massive staircase and the white figurines on stands along the wall are just a blur as we walk down the hall. The blue runner under my feet, nothing but a hazy mist of patterns as Rune takes me to my old room.

When we reach the door, he throws it open and shoves me through. My teeth gnash together when he closes the door, the quiet click of the latch catching crashing through the silence.

"How many of them did you let touch you?" Rune says, one hand still on the doorknob, another flattened to his red tie, hatred making his breathing ragged.

Fear slides like ice through my veins.

"How many of them did you let *fuck* you?"

I shake my head as I step back, aware of the fact he's angry because I allowed them to touch me. I think he's scared that I may have liked it a little too much. Enjoyed myself and their every touch. Rune knows I only spread my legs for him to stop him from hurting me. And here, I willingly slept with the men he hates.

Rune steps forward. I slide a step back. His strangled voice and barely contained rage makes fear and horror weave around my lungs like thorny vines. "You fucked those *four* men in *my* club like a fucking whore."

The way the last word hisses out from him makes me wish the helicopter had fucking crashed.

“You’re so much like your mother.”

The words hurt more than they should. I hated my mother, but Rune hated her more. To the point he murdered her and my father. Yet for him to tell me I’m just like her, stings. He’s implied it. Let his hatred for her bleed into me, but he’s never said it. Not out loud.

His hatred for Caroline Julian, for the men, piled on top of all the things he’s done, are going to ruin me.

If I let them.

“Is that why you like me so much, *Papa*?“ My voice turns to honey, but every word feels jagged, knowing they’re going to cut me in the end. “Did you fuck her traitorous cunt like you fuck mine?”

He reels back, hand drawing up into a fist, and I brace myself for it, yet it doesn’t come. The pain of his hit remains clenched in his fist as he lets his hand drop to his side.

“Is she ready?”

Over Rune’s shoulder I see Clyde slipping into the room, and then a familiar face in the doorway. I start, so confused that I shake my head.

“Dr. Morgan?” I ask, my heart picking up pace. “Why is my gynecologist here?”

Clyde steps next to me, placing his hand on my lower back. The touch hits me as harsh as a kick to my spine as the realization settles.

I turn to Rune. “You have got to be kidding me.”

His jaw pops, but he says nothing.

When I look back at Dr. Morgan, he at least has the decency to look ashamed.

Rune gestures to the bed behind me. “Lie down.”

I turn, gaze landing on the bed. Horror floods my veins. I shake my head, light trembling starting in my hands. “No.”

He’s going to have me examined on my childhood bed. How many nights have I spent in this bed with Delly laughing, telling secrets? How many nights did she climb under the covers with me, promising to keep me safe from the nightmares that kept me awake at night? From the demons in my head?

I turn back around, facing Clyde, my socks catching on the thick shag carpeting. “Tell him no.”

He looks away.

Fucking coward.

I turn back to Rune. Why? I have no clue. He doesn't give a fuck about my protests. Only if my body is fit to use again. God forbid I got an STD, or worse, pregnant. That would take far longer than an antibiotic to resolve before he could fuck me again.

"I'm fine," I say, but my voice shakes. I take another step back. Rune grabs my arm so tight I wince.

"Lie down," Rune says. "They had you for three fucking weeks. After they violated you in my fucking club."

I shake my head, tears stinging my eyes. "No. I don't need an exam. I'm fine." I gesture to my dress, my body. "See? I'm not hurt."

Clyde moves up next to me, and grips my hand, pulling me toward the bed. My sweater that I've been holding falls to the floor and he leans down to pick it up. He bends, pausing slightly, like he's seeing it and me for the first time. As Clyde stands, he takes in my appearance. How tightly knit and warm the sweater and how I'm still slightly plump in all the wrong places. That I'm not cowering or covered in bruises or scars.

I wonder if he can see all the things that Rune clearly can.

"You're telling me you didn't fuck the four men who held you?" Rune asks, keeping his eyes locked on my mouth. I don't know what my face does, but I know it must give me away because he makes a sound in his throat and points to the bed again.

A violent shiver moves through my body as I step forward. I know if I don't do as I'm told, they'll make me. That's what Rune does. Forces. Takes.

My legs tremble as I sit on the edge. I wait for him to turn and leave, but Rune doesn't move.

My brows knit. I glance at Clyde, whose eyes fall to the floor.

"You need to remove your underwear," Morgan says. "Then lie back."

My eyes fly back up to Rune at my feet, then over to Clyde on the other side of my room, gaze stormy but looking over my shoulder instead of at me.

They're not planning on leaving. They're going to watch. Rune's going to make sure that the exam is done.

My chin quivers. Dr. Morgan shoots me an apologetic smile as he pulls the small wooden stool from my vanity and pats the bed behind me. I lie back, clutching the cold, stiff comforter, turning my face away so Rune doesn't see the tear slip past.

I feel myself splintering, fading away. Someone, I think Dr Morgan says something, and then tells me to bend my legs. My dress is lifted, then a blanket is draped over my knees. An icy hand touches my hip, and my underwear slips down my thighs. I clench my jaw, biting back a scream, the flood of tears building behind my eyes, threatening to break loose.

My legs shake as his chilly hand slides up my inner thigh and he gently eases my legs apart.

I've been violated so much, in so many ways throughout my life, that any touch that isn't completely welcome feels like an invasion of my soul. And right now, feeling Rune's penetrating gaze on me as Morgan examines my body, feels like the worst violation yet.

The cold plastic of the instrument and then the pinch of pain makes me gasp. My mind blanks.

"Did they fuck her?" Rune asks.

I feel Morgan stop moving and sense more than see him turn to Rune at his side. "That's not something I can tell. But there are no signs of trauma, if that's what you mean."

Rune makes a sound in his throat. Something like disgust, or maybe he's filing the information away for later. Dr. Morgan asks me several questions about my cycle, Rune interrupting every few minutes to ask some invasive question, and again if they touched me. he tells me he's going to take a blood sample as well, and I don't fight it. There's no point. When he's done collecting samples, Morgan pats my leg and tells me to relax.

"Are you sure?" Morgan asks.

I take in a breath, trying to refocus, stretching my legs out as I adjust my dress and the blanket over my thighs, doing my best to ignore the hollowness between my legs.

"Yes," Rune says.

"Can it wait?" I hear Clyde ask, and how his words leave him, all cracked and battered, makes me turn my head to look at him.

"It's part of the deal." Rune strides across the room, taking a seat at the end of the bed.

“What deal?” I ask, trying to sit up, but Morgan’s hand lands on my chest, pushing me down, less gentle this time.

“It will take about a week for her system to be regulated after it’s removed,” Morgan tells Rune. “But it’s still possible even as early as tomorrow.”

I wave my hand. “Hello. After what’s removed?”

Rune glances at Clyde. “Hold her down.”

Alarm bells sound in my head, my heart kicking in my chest. I open my mouth to ask them what the fuck he means when I see the scalpel in Morgan’s hand.

“What the fuck are you doing?” I ask, but the question rings in the room like a high-pitched scream.

“The only way to remove it, is surgically,” Morgan says, and pulls my left arm out, placing my hand on his lap.

Understanding dawns on me.

“It’s only a year old.” Panic needles my cheeks, makes my skin flush and beads of sweat form. I swallow, my mouth suddenly dry, as Clyde grasps my wrist, his other hand holding my shoulder down, keeping my arm pinned to the bed.

This isn’t happening.

“You said it lasts years,” I shriek. “They couldn’t get me pregnant. It’s working just fine.”

“You said they didn’t touch you while you were there,” Rune says so coldly, my entire body goes still. His menacing stare returns to Morgan. “Take it out.”

My attempt to jerk my arm away is useless as Clyde pins my arm to the bed and shoves my shoulder harder into the mattress. Morgan pinches the thin rod under the skin of my inner arm, so it’s outlined under my flesh.

“But I don’t want it out.” I say, even as he presses the scalpel to my skin.

The wires in my head cross, malfunctioning. I am about to ask about a numbing injection, and why he’s not administering one, why they want the birth control implant removed, when pain shoots like molten fire through my arm, cutting off all thoughts.

Words.

I scream. My arm jerks. Feet thrash. Rune grips my ankles pinning it to the bed. Clyde’s dark eyes collide with mine. Remorse clouds them and

he looks away as his grip tightens.

The blade cuts deeper, digging under the flesh. Angling. Searching.

“Almost,” Morgan says, but his voice sounds muffled, like I’m underwater.

I’m drowning in pain. Not just the scalpel digging under my flesh, but from the betrayal.

“Clyde.” My voice is a whimper.

The scalpel twists. “Hold still, it slipped. I have to make the incision longer.”

I buck, my hips leaving the bed.

“Got it.”

I don’t know what happens next. I can’t see past my tears. Past the pain. The knowledge that I have so little control over my life or my body.

And the fact they sent me back to this.

He promised. They promised, I say over and over as Morgan sticks the needle through my flesh, sewing the small wound closed.

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Chapter 5

Delilah

SLEEP NEVER VISITED ME last night. Even after Striker deposited me into my bed and I screamed at him to leave, and I wept until I was exhausted. Even after I laid in bed, watching the room turn from black to gray with the sunrise, feeling like I was made of nothing but bones and tears, sleep didn't rescue me from this nightmare. My mind feels like it's cracking open. My body feels like they've taken it, used it, fucked it, and then set me on fire.

And I'm burning up with rage. Rage over the unfairness of it all.

Logically, I know they had little choice. These things are practically blood packs. I've heard whispers of them, though I never was subjected to one. Rune is progressive in some ways, breaking away from traditions. He allowed my marriage to Dave. Said little when I filed for divorce. I'm set to inherit his company and everything he built. He's trained me for years like he would have a son, to be ruthless enough to keep his name, his company, going, even after his death.

Now I'm not so sure I want it.

Not when I know what his company was built on.

It's just after sunrise, and my head swims with fatigue. Tiny rocks and flecks of mud stick to my boots as I stalk down the long road stretching along the cliff's edge. With the morning came a bitter wind, turning the ocean a metallic gray and the waves violent. Dark clouds roll in from the

east, blocking out the yellow rays of the sunrise, making it feel like the world is prepping for the Apocalypse.

I almost expect my four horsemen to chase me down and drag me back to the house, but no one bothers to come after me. Maybe they think I'm still in my room, crying into my pillow. Maybe they think I can't, or won't, try to leave.

How they've underestimated my drive to get what I want.

And what I want is Cora. Safe with me. Back in my arms, away from danger.

Away from Rune.

I stop in front of the weathered building, hands shoved deep down into the pockets of my knit sweater, looking from the door with the window to the large swinging doors of the garage. The handles on the garage doors are gone, but rust stains run down the old paint-flaked wood, like dried blood from where they were screwed in.

Knowing I can't open the massive doors, I head for the smaller one with the rippled glass window. I spotted the large carriage house from the window at the back of the house last week but paid little attention to it. Why I didn't, I'm not sure. Then again, I was so busy walking around wishing the men would talk to me I didn't care about much else.

Certainly not escaping. I never once thought about what the carriage house may contain.

Like a vehicle.

The men got us here somehow. I doubt they had a chopper drop us off, and since the house is stocked with food and supplies at all times, I know they were leaving to go on runs to gather items.

The door creaks when I swing it open, and I'm blasted with the scent of smokey wood and male. Sweat and something that reminds me of leather and cleaner. Lemony like Striker and Viper and smokey like Reaper.

My stomach clenches. He had promised he'd get her when he'd planned to send her away.

He fucking better not have lied.

When Reaper showed me what Rune was doing, he said they have a plan but failed to mention what it is. Only that they needed me to help them. If they want my cooperation, they're going to listen to me for a change.

They need *me*.

I hold the cards now. If they want my help to take Rune down, if they want my help to exact revenge for their dead brother, they will not stop me from making sure Cora is safe.

And I need to get to her, to make sure she is. I'm tired of waiting for them to tell me their plans. I want Rune stopped so he can't hurt anyone ever again. I want answers.

I want Cora.

Stopping in the center of the homemade gym, I take in a breath, trying to cool my anger. Seeing the obvious hold their father has over them, it is apparent that these men have become accustomed to following orders without question. They're either too used to taking orders, or too scared to defy them.

Rune was never too harsh with me. Not by his own hand. I learned my lessons from him in other ways. Not to break rules or go against his wishes because I wasn't the one to suffer the consequences. Whoever I was with did. Boyfriends. Associates. Coworkers.

Shoving the useless thoughts away, I scan the room. Off to the side, next to a shelf lined with small weights, I spot another door that must lead out to the garage. It sticks as I try to open it, but when I ram it with my shoulder. It gives, spilling me out into a dark, musty garage. I stumble down, nearly twisting my ankle at the sudden drop, but catch myself on the door.

It's dark in the garage, barely any light bleeding in from under the doors and the faint daylight spilling in behind me, but I see it right away.

A large, solid black SUV.

"I knew it," I mutter, irritation at myself for not looking sooner, making me curse under my breath.

I swear, if the keys are in there…

They aren't and the SUV is locked when I try the handle.

Walking around the huge vehicle, I try each door and the back hatch with no luck, noting the Florida tag, when I spot the sleek black motorcycle. I check for keys, but there are none. Not that I know how to ride a bike, but I'd still try.

Even though there's room for another car, the garage is empty, save for some tools hanging on the back wall. I glance around, looking for anywhere a key may be hidden, but they wouldn't be stupid enough to leave the keys in here.

Sucking in a breath, I turn and step back into the weight room, shutting the door behind me.

My gut churns with unease as I step back outside into the chilly air and stare at the mansion in the distance. I know where the keys are. But the last time I went searching, I paid dearly for defying them.

A wave of dread washes over me, my heart pounding in my chest, the thought of stepping foot on the fourth floor sending shivers down my spine. It’s only been a few days since I learned there are far worse punishments than a spanking or a belt to my rear.

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Chapter 6

Delilah

MY BOOT DRAGS AS it hits the top step, and I wonder how I've managed to climb a set of stairs several times a day and still be this out of shape. My determination began wavering after the second set of stairs, but now that I'm on the fourth floor, it's rising again, making my heart skip.

I need to get in better shape.

And I need to find those keys.

I've already determined the keys are in Reaper's room, so I stop at the first door, hoping I've got the right room.

I twist the knob, but it's locked. Lifting my foot, my hand drops to grab for my little knife when I remember once again, Viper never gave it back to me.

Damn it.

Not wasting time, I move to the second door, feeling like Goldilocks, terrified the bears are going to find me as I reach for the knob. When it turns easily, my fear jumps up a few notches, but I push, and the door swings open with a quiet creak. I glance over my shoulder, my heart already thundering so fast it's hard to breathe. Part of me expects Striker to appear, belt in hand and at the ready, but the house is deadly quiet.

I step in, closing the door behind me, and scan the room. It's just like Striker's, but there're no masks lined up, and no personal items on display. The dresser drawers reveal nothing, only a few black shirts and socks. The bottom drawer reveals a stack of masks, telling me I'm in Breaker's room.

Other than that, the room is completely empty save for one of those old traveling trunks. I slide over to the vintage footlocker at the end of his bed, taking in the creamy, pillowy comforter, and knitted blanket thrown artfully over the end. I drop to my knees in front of the leather footlocker and flip the rusted latch open. As much as I know I shouldn't be snooping, I can't seem to stop myself.

Inside are several old and worn music books and thick folders bound with string. Even though my mind screams to hurry, I pick up a folder and unravel the string, opening it to the last page.

I blink several times, trying to figure out what I'm seeing. Times and dates. Random names, mostly female, and some strange form of code. Many have been crossed out, some so aggressively, the pen ripped through the paper. The next page holds more names, some men, but all crossed out. In the middle of the book are pages filled up with strange lists, almost like a log, with dates and times and a letter next to it.

C 11-12-20 12:00/12:30 w/D CICI Italian

Stay focused. Stay centered.

My mother's words flash in my head and my heart flutters painfully. It's been so many years since I've even thought about that day that I slam the book shut and shove it back, closing Breaker's trunk and standing.

Keys. I need those keys.

I glance at the bed again, the fluffy blankets and expensive sheets, and I briefly wonder what it would be like to sleep next to them.

Which one, Delilah?

I shake the thought loose, because I don't have the mental or emotional capacity to delve into the logistics of fucking four men and my best friend. Much less picking apart what their promises mean when they just sent Cora back to the seventh level of hell.

Scanning the space one last time, I leave Breaker's room, and dart to the door between Striker and Breakers. I don't even have to wonder if it's locked because the door is partially open, like it never latched all the way. Using just the tips of my fingers, I tap it, and it swings open. Bright yellow light from the bedside lamp spills across the floor, illuminating the space with a buttery glow. When I step in, I know immediately it's Viper's room.

It smells like him.

Like soap and citrus and untamed male.

The bed’s unmade and a black plastic laundry hamper sits at the end of the bed, black pants and shirts spilling onto the floor. Like he was rummaging through it, or tossed the clothes in its direction, not caring if they made it into the basket.

On the dresser sits a stack of books. I run my thumb along the spines of each one, reading the titles, surprised and somehow not when I see they are all Tolkien novels.

With a hint of a smile, because of course, Viper would be a fantasy nerd, I ease the top drawer open. Nothing but boxers and socks. My brows raise when I open the second drawer.

Rope, silk fabric like the black material he used to cover my eyes that night in the dining room, several handcuffs, and an array of things I don’t even know how to identify, littler the drawer. I pick up a bottle of clear liquid and read the label, smirking when I see it’s lube.

Other than his naughty second drawer, the dresser holds nothing but clothes and his masks. I check the large armoire and gasp when I find a massive array of knives lining the interior instead of clothes. On the door, I spot a small one, similar to the one he gave me, and snag it, shoving it in my boot, not at all feeling guilty for stealing.

Or snooping.

Viper’s room has revealed more about him than the others and fits with what I’ve learned of him over the last few weeks.

There is only one room left. My eyes move back to the first door.

Heart pounding, I bolt back and stop in front of it, already pulling my newfound knife from my boot and jamming it between the latch and frame. It takes some wiggling, but it finally pops and the door swings open. Holding my breath, I wait. When Reaper doesn’t materialize to reprimand me for breaking into his room, I run forward, going first for the dresser.

I pause, breath seizing in my lungs when I see what’s in the top drawer.

Handfuls of small wooden figures lay scattered in the drawer, sliding around as I pull it open fully. I reach in, picking up a small bear. It’s not as crudely made as the one I found in Striker’s room, but it’s not as well-crafted as the next one I pick up. It’s another bear, but this one has fur and eyes carved into the soft brown wood.

I set it down gently, staring at the carving, seeing the years of progress the carver made, each little figurine slightly better than the next. In

the back, I spot one of two wolves, the carving rough and half completed. Like the person never finished it.

Or never got the chance.

He made them.

Their brother.

Slowly, I slide the drawer shut, feeling like I'm invading something far more personal than all the items in Viper's room. Like I never should have seen these.

My heart sinks, thinking of a man like Viper, or Breaker. Maybe he was like Striker, or Reaper, sitting somewhere carving these little figurines.

It puts a human to the information they gave me.

It wasn't just a nameless person my father killed. He was their brother. Someone they loved. Someone who carved little animals and gave them as gifts, a show of his love and affection. Possibly even a lover.

My heart pangs and I step back, suddenly not caring about the keys. Suddenly not caring about the why or how. Not caring if they manipulated me, or who was at fault for Cora being sent away.

I just want her safe.

Safe from Rune. Away from the man who killed the person who carved animals from blocks of wood and gave it to his brothers.

I need to get her.

I open the next drawer and search, finding Reaper's clothes and socks neatly organized. A few belts coiled up tightly. Irritated, I shut the last drawer and head for the little table holding the lamp next to his bed.

I stop for a minute, looking down at the white bedding, the crisp sheets and try to picture him sleeping here. I can't. It's hard to picture him as anything but a massive, looming form. But that doesn't seem to fit him well anymore after who he was with us just two nights ago.

Passionate. Tender with Cora. With me.

As I slide the drawer open, I hear the clanging of metal before I spot the keys. I grip them, shoving them down into the pocket of my sweater.

"Found what you were looking for?"

I scream, my hand flying to my mouth as I spin.

Reaper stands in the doorway, leaning against the frame, watching me, his mask smirking like I'm sure he is. I wonder how long he's been there. If he saw me looking at his collection of memories.

His bare hand drops to his belt, hooking his thumb in the leather band. Of course, my eyes drop. My cheeks heat, remembering him inside me. Moving into me, emitting feral groans as he fucked me. Our eyes meet. The way his gaze dips down, then back up to my face, tells me he's remembering too.

But he says nothing.

We haven't spoken. Not yet. He vowed to get her, but other than those few words, we've not spoken since he told me he'd killed to have me. I spent the morning with Striker and Cora, then didn't see him again until I stepped foot in the library and came face to face with their father.

He's made so many promises, yet here we are. Cora gone.

My heart in shambles.

Reaper unmoving. Barely breathing.

My skin picks with unease. I'm not sure what to say to him after everything. It feels like we're still complete strangers. Like we didn't say or do any of the things that lovers do. Like whoever we were the other night, whatever passion possessed us was fleeting and we're once again just these two people staring at each other.

Captive and captor.

"Put the keys back, Delilah."

Shit. When he says my name that way, with that slight growl laced with a warning, I *want* to defy him.

Instead of barking out the demand again, he surprises me by saying, "And why would my pretty Kitten need the car keys?"

God. I hate my body.

My belly ripples, his compliment spreading desire through me, heating between my thighs. An ache blooms, one I know he can ease, and I don't like the sensation. It makes me feel vulnerable. This feeling of being left wanting.

So, I do what I do best.

"So, I can take a fucking scenic drive," I snap. "Why do you think?"

He pushes off the doorframe, moving closer, and I take a step back. Even after all the intimate moments, even after his promises, I'm not foolish enough to forget what he is.

Reaper pauses when my foot slides back to keep space between us, his entire body tensing, back straightening, making him look even more

intimidating. I think he must clench his teeth with how his jaw moves under his mask.

He doesn't like that I'm putting space between us. I wonder if it's because he knows he still scares me a little.

Maybe even a lot.

He's a killer, after all.

His eyes darken, hardening, losing all spark they had when he slipped his cum soaked fingers in my mouth and told me I was theirs.

His.

I think… I think whatever we built, that small structure held together by promises and hope, just crumbled.

His stance widens. Arms cross, eyes narrowing in on me like I'm a target now. Not something he craves. "What's your plan? Drive back and return to your father? And tell him what, Kitten?"

The way he says my pet name makes my skin itch, the single word splintering into a thousand needles, scraping my flesh with its harshness. It no longer holds that lustful heat.

"That you've fucked your captors? That you are ours now? Will you tell him how much you liked all of our cum in you? How good it feels to be with us?" Reaper takes a step backward, further away from me. He's the one putting distance between us now and I feel that stabbing of hurt that he must have felt a moment ago. "Or were you just planning on popping in and rescuing her?"

"I don't know," I grit out, angry at myself for this mess I've let myself get into. Angry at Reaper for putting me in this position. Feeling stupid for letting myself believe for a brief moment we…

We what?

Could have a relationship? With the four men who kidnapped me, held me hostage, forced me to my knees, took a belt to me, and then sent my best friend away? I don't think they're the crazy ones anymore. It's obviously me.

I've been here too long, tucked away from reality, and I'm losing my mind. Sane people don't fuck the men who are holding them captive. Sane people don't crave another night with them. And sane people certainly don't have this bone deep ache to bury their face in the chest of the killer standing before them until the pain, the longing, the fear, goes away.

“You can’t go back yet,” Reaper says, his use of the word yet snagging in my head and freeing me from my downward spiral. “It’s not time.”

Hope blooms in my chest, easing that ache he’s put there. “Yet?”

Ignoring me, Reaper turns his back. He doesn’t even try to get the keys from me.

How quickly he trained his kitten.

“She needs me,” I say, voice wavering.

He doesn’t answer.

Rage snakes through my mind at his blatant dismissal. How can he be so callous when he promised her? He promised us? We’re his. *She’s* his. My chest heaves, eyes stinging, remembering, him promising her. Us. I don’t even know what that means, belonging to them, to him, but I’ve never felt so wanted.

Wanted as a tool, Delilah. A way to get revenge on Rune. I need to remember that. I’m a means to an end. I’m their revenge and that’s it.

They can all make promises, vow to protect, fuck me into believing they want nothing more than us, but they sent her back.

They took her from me.

Again.

“When is a good time, Reaper?” I snarl. “After she’s hurt again?”

He pauses in the doorway, back growing rigid. Over his shoulder, he says, “When you are trained and prepared for the mission.”

“What mission?” I snap. “You have yet to tell me what you want me to do.”

Of course he doesn’t answer.

“What if he hurts her?” The way my voice cracks angers me even more. When his shoulders droop, rage splinters through me.

How dare he act like he cares?

I growl as I march forward, gripping his arm to force him to look at me. He lets me turn him, lets me shake his arm like I can shake some sense into him. Convince him to send me back now, right this minute. Instead of responding with venom, his onyx eyes seem to grow tender, his whole body softening under my grip.

“You can go back when I know you can defend yourself—“

“From who?” I snap. “You really think my father would hurt me?”

All that softness snaps, gone in an instant, and he somehow looks larger than before. I don't have to see his face to know he's angry. Rage leaks from him with every controlled breath. "You have no idea what Rune's capable of when he's cornered. When he feels slighted. When he wants revenge."

"Revenge?" I ask, my brows knitting. "On you? For taking me?"

His hands flex, but he says nothing.

"I can handle Rune," I say, letting go of his arm.

His humorless laugh does nothing but pour gasoline on my rage.

My neck throbs from my thundering pulse. "You *lied* to her."

Fury flares his eyes. "You understand nothing," he snaps. "Do you really believe I —"

"You promised her," I say, cutting off his next few words. I don't care what they are. He's just spewing excuses. "You promised *me*."

"I told you we'll get her."

"After what? She's raped?"

His eyes close and his body goes rigid. "I have put measures into place to ensure—"

"Ensure what? He's hurt her for years and no one knew."

"If I hadn't sent her back, it would have ruined years of planning."

I shake my head, sick of all of this. "I don't know what's worse. That you were too much of a coward to defy your father, or that you sent her back to be abused by the man you hate."

He rears back like I slapped him, then moves forward so fast, I barely have time to react before he's gripping my arm, dragging me to him. His other arm lifts and I flinch. Reaper stills, hand frozen mid-air, eyes flashing with something like disappointment, before he slowly continues moving it toward me, gently tucking strands of hair behind my ear.

"I underestimated you," Reaper whispers. His eyes grow darker, like the sight of me disgusts him. It makes my heart skip because I've not seen that dark look in weeks. "I won't make that mistake again. You are Rune Gavin's daughter, after all. Cruel."

He shoves me back so violently I stagger, my stomach sinking.

"And you will manipulate innocent people to get what you want," I snarl, hurt and anger making my tongue loose. "You lied to get us to trust you and you took—"

“Took?” he growls. “I took what you *gave* me, my pretty little Kitten.”

My cheeks flush, air sucking in my lungs from the possessive snarl in his voice.

He grips my arm again, shoving me backward. “And it’s ours now. *You’re* mine.”

My ass hits the edge of the bed, and he shoves me down. I scramble backward onto the mattress as he crawls forward.

“If you think you’re going to touch me again, you’re sadly mistaken,” I hiss, rage blurring my vision at his audacity. “You lost the privilege of fucking me when you sent my best friend back to her abuser.”

He doesn’t answer, just continues to move, forcing me up higher and higher on the bed. My back hits the headboard. It rattles and hits the wall. He stops in front of me, kneeling between my thighs that have inched up toward my chest in a futile attempt to keep him from touching me. The metal rails dig into my shoulders as I try to scoot up even higher until his hand drops to his belt and I freeze. Long, ink covered fingers slip it free of the buckle. My eyes dart back up to his.

“Don’t you dare,” I grate. Anger mixed with something tasting close to arousal, making me heady.

He yanks, freeing the leather from the buckle. Black eyes pin me in place. The silky sound of leather slipping through belt loops hits me between my legs.

“Reaper.” Even I hear the faint, breathy way his name slips out like a plea, though I’m not sure what for. Stop? Keep going? Free yourself and let me take you in my mouth like I’ve been shamelessly thinking about for far too long?

“Grip the headboard.”

A dull throb in my clit makes me move before I’m thinking, grabbing the metal rails on either side of my head.

“That’s my good girl,” he purrs, voice dropping low. “Even you know you belong to me.”

My teeth gnash together, fingers unfurling, embarrassment heating my cheeks. Before I can move, he’s gripping one of my wrists and holding it against the railing. With his other he’s wrapping the belt around and around, binding it to the rail.

“What are you doing?” I scream, using my free hand to claw at his fingers as he pulls the belt and slips it into itself, tying my wrist to the headboard.

He doesn’t answer as he slides back off the bed and moves to his dresser. I scramble, trying to slip the leather free, but he’s got a weird knot I’ve never seen before. I’ve barely gotten it loose before he’s back and gripping my other hand, still fumbling with the leather, and slams it against the railing, wrapping the belt around it.

A furious scream rips from my throat. “You fucking asshole!”

Still nothing. Even as I try to kick him in his gut, he says nothing. Just grips my ankle and yanks my leg downward, pinning it to the bed. I kick again, thrashing wildly, but he manages to climb between my legs, gripping my thighs so tight my pussy throbs. Reaper pulls me down toward him by my thighs until my dress is hitched up and my legs are fully open for him. When his hard length hits my clit, I instantly clamp my mouth shut.

“Good girl. No screaming,” he says calmly. Like this is normal. He grinds his dick to me again, rubbing himself over me and I feel how wet I am, my underwear soaked. When he runs his thumb over the material, I press my eyes closed, biting my lip to hold in my whimper. “Look how wet you get for me, Kitten. I thought you didn’t want me to fuck you.”

I swallow, opening my eyes to pin him with a glare. “I don’t.”

He shakes his head. “You’re a terrible liar.” He scoots back but keeps my thighs in his grip. “We’ll have to work on that.”

Reaper yanks my legs open wider, shoving them up toward my chest, and leans down, pressing his masked face to my underwear. He breathes in deeply, letting out this strangled, almost feral groan, savoring my scent. Releasing my legs, he drags his nose up over my belly, then between my breasts, burying it in the fabric of my dress. His hands slide up, moving under the material, fingers like flames on my bare skin. I grip the railing, hating how my body aches with need. How my legs part even more. By the time he’s pressed his nose to my neck, his entire body covers mine and his hands have traveled higher, pinching my nipples through my thin bra, so that I’m arching to meet him, wrapping a leg around his, trying to get our bodies connected in any and every way.

“God,” he grates. “I love you like this. Shamelessly desperate.” His masked mouth skims over mine, and I feel his breath. Smell him. Spice and

longing. ”You turn into such a sweet, good girl when you want my cock buried in you.”

Rage heats my cheeks. I buck against him but regret it as it drives him harder into me.

“You’ll only have me again if I’m kicking and screaming,” I snarl.

“Promises, promises,” he growls and leans down to whisper, “Even if I never sink between your thighs again, this pretty cunt belongs to us. You belong to us. Your mind, your body, your fucking soul. Every single breath you inhale belongs to *me*.”

He sits up and scoots off the bed. I grind my teeth, biting back any retort because I know it’s pointless. When he adjusts himself and fishes the keys from my pocket, all the heat that had been building turns cold, and unease ripples in my belly.

“Reaper.”

He ignores me and walks to the door.

“Reaper. You can’t keep me tied up here,” I scream.

He pauses in the door. “No? You tried to run. You know what happens when you try to run, Kitten.”

Shit. I clamp my mouth shut, because yes. I do.

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Chapter 7

Breaker

15 Years Ago, September, Age 13

TINY PINPRICKS OF LIGHT filter through the black fabric covering my eyes. Shadowy outlines of objects moving past, blocking the light briefly, then light flares brightly again making me wince.

I blink, trying to focus, confusion making my head swim. My head feels fuzzy, and it feels and tastes like someone stuck a sock in my mouth it's so dry. I lick my lips. My arm hurts. I'm lying on my side, my head tilted at a weird angle, causing pain to pinch in my neck. I try to move but I realize my hands are tied behind my back with something coarse.

Rope.

Fuck. I have to pee.

Metal creaks. Something squeaks. Whatever I'm lying on lurches. My body jolts, rises slightly. Then I'm floating in an abyss of darkness for a millisecond before hitting down with a painful smack.

A groan and a loud thud to my left.

I recognize the throaty moan.

Viper.

There's another squeal then the sound of metal grating metal.

We're in a truck.

The fabric over my head sticks to my face as I inhale through my nose, breathing in deeply, smelling damp earth and exhaust and ammonia.

"We're in a truck bed," I say.

"No shit." Striker's raspy voice comes from behind me.

Something hard hits the top of my head.

"Sorry," Viper grates. "I hope that wasn't your nuts."

"Where are we?" I ask, wishing I could rub my forehead to clear the fog. The need to drink something, feel cool wetness on my tongue is all I can think about for a moment.

"No fucking clue," Viper says with a slight creak in his voice. Like he was yelling or a hasn't used his voice in a long time. Or he's as thirty as I am. "Last thing I remember was Maxy coming in my room and telling me to shut the fuck up."

"I think I remember a helicopter or something," Striker says. "I vaguely remember a loud engine before passing out again."

My brows knit, the fabric sucking into my mouth as I breathe. There's a tight knot forming in the center of my chest. It feels like panic. I swallow, trying to gulp down the fear with it.

This isn't the first time we've been carted off for a training mission, but this is the first time we've been blindfolded and bound, unable to see where Maxim was taking us to train that day. Sometimes it was just in the large range near the school, other's it was well past the town, in dark, dense woods where he taught us to set up snares.

Try as I might, I don't remember Fallon or Maxim mentioning any training. They've been so focused on Reaper and Hunter's first mission, and the chaos that broke out afterward, to pay us much mind the last few days. I do remember Commander Maxim's gleaming eye patch as he crowded me, getting in my face, but it all just kind of goes black.

"He drugged us," Striker says. There's a thud from behind me like he kicked the tailgate. "And I have no clue where the fuck we are, but I really have to piss."

Viper makes a huffing noise. "I already did."

Striker gags. “Gross.”

The truck breaks hard, coming to an abrupt stop. I skid, my whole body lurching then sliding back, slamming into Striker behind me. He grunts. Cold wetness seeps into my shoulder.

“Fuck man,” I say. “Viper.”

“Nature called while I was knocked out. Not my fault.”

A male voice, harsh and gravelly breaks through the air. I don’t recognize it, so it’s not someone from the school.

“Get them out. We need to get the fuck out of here before it begins.”

“What begins?” Viper shouts. He’s always been better at picking up Russian than Striker or me. “Hey!” he calls to the voice. “Want to tell us—“

A loud thwack, like a hand hitting metal rings in the air, making my body tense. Whoever has us just slapped the tailgate. I know that sound. I heard it enough times when Cook would load us into the back of his big truck and we’d all head to the village for the afternoon.

“Fucking kid pissed himself,” someone else says, another faceless voice in the language I can barely pick up. *“I’m not touching that one.”*

“Maybe if you guys had not fucking—“ Viper grunts, then heaves out a cough like he’s been hit in the gut. “Get your fucking hands off me,” he yells, but the words are cut short, then there’s a thud followed by a gravelly groan.

Striker’s enraged voice fills the air. “Fuck off,” he shouts then another thud. Someone grabs my arm and one thigh and I’m airborne. I hit solid ground with painful smack, banging my head on a soft body.

Viper makes another choking sound.

“Fuck man,” he grates. “That was my nuts.”

Before I can finish the thought that this is all outside our normal training, one of the men grab my hands, kicking my heart rate up higher and I feel cold metal against my wrist as the rope’s cut away. Instantly, I move to sit up, but a brutal kick to my side makes me fall back, pain shooting sharply through my ribcage.

“Asshole,” I wheeze, but remain still. I’m a quick learner and I know I don’t want another boot to the ribs.

Behind me, the truck doors slam, and tires screech, dirt and rocks spitting up and hitting my back as the sound of the truck lurching forward drowns out Viper’s shouts.

When the sound of the engine fades, I sit up and tear my hood off. Next to me, Viper lies on his side, bound and blindfolded. Behind me, Striker's curled into a ball, shoulders moving like he's…

Crying?

"I can't get these fucking knots undone," he hisses.

My shoulders ease, realizing he's trying to untie himself. I shift to my knees, ignoring my sore muscles, and the pain in my ribcage, and rip first Striker's then Viper's hoods off. They both blink, looking up at me in the bright light as their eyes adjust.

"How'd you get free?' Viper asks. "Never mind. Just untie us."

I reach for my knife I keep clipped to my belt, but it's not there.

"Left boot," Viper says. "I always keep one tucked away in case."

I untie his boot and find the little knife and pull it free. After I cut them free, they sit, rubbing their wrists and looking around.

Now I notice where we are.

Everything is green and dark brown, with pops of orange and red in the leaves of the trees. A few bright spots of yellow scatter the foliage, like autumn is slowly creeping in. Not like at the school where this time of the year it's already freezing at night, winter settling in, stripping the trees bare, and sometimes even snowing. This place, wherever this place is, looks similar, yet vastly different.

We're in a small clearing, the forest around us creaking ominously. Little birds chirp. There's a scraping sound, like the tall pines are rubbing their limbs together, excited we're here. I've never seen any place other than the village and the school, but I'm reminded of the woods that lie beyond the range. There's a mix of leafy trees here, but this place is missing the tall, thick trunk pines. There are a few scattered pines, but they are spindly, and the needles look different.

I lay my hand to the earth. The grounds still damp, not frozen over, the landscape more wet than dry. The forest circling the clearing is thick with underbrush and mossy rocks and lush greenery. Hills roll up to low mountains in the distance, lage jagged rocks in piles, pouring from the hillside.

"Where are we?" Striker says, standing on shaky legs. He turns away, taking a few steps toward a nearby tree and unzips, pissing on the gnarled roots.

I glance down to my shirt, and realize I'm still in my regular uniform, my arm and thigh wet with Viper's piss. With a groan creaking from me, I stand and turn away to relieve myself before I'm covered in my urine too.

"Not sure," Viper says from behind me, "but it's no place I've ever seen before."

"I don't think we're anywhere near the school," Striker says, coming up behind me as I adjust my pants, trying to ignore the wetness on my thigh, my legs weak with relief.

"I wouldn't have pissed myself if we were near the school," Viper points out. He jerks his thumb over his shoulder to the trees and brush. "That's not even local flora. The pines are different." He gestures to the mossy rocks and thin leafy vines snaking along the ground. "And that's not even something that resembles the same country."

Striker's brows rise as he takes in the surrounding woods, my gut growing oily with unease.

"You don't think…" I let my voice trail off, fear skittering like mice down my arms, making me forget about my piss soaked clothes. All I can focus on are Viper's words and the fact we've all been stripped of our knives. Striker doesn't have his rifle like he usually does when we've gone for training outside the school, and we have no rucksacks full of supplies to get us through the day.

We have nothing.

Just like the stories we heard.

Three go out.

Only two come back.

A choice has to be made.

"Fuck," Viper hisses, scrambling up to stand, eyes flashing in panic as his brows turn down. He glances around, chest heaving. "Neither of you have gone through training. You're both too young. Hell, *I'm* too young."

"There's no way." Striker steps closer to me, grabbing my shoulders to turn me to face him. "What do you remember?"

I shake my head, my gaze snagging with his golden eyes. My stomach dips at the obvious fear reflecting back at me. "Nothing. Just Maxim. Maybe in my room?" I shake my head, trying to remember. A flash of books, a long wood table, dusty moonlight filtering in through the grimy

window. “No, I think I was still in the library after Maxim announced an early lights out over the speakers.”

“Why were you in the library?” Striker asks.

My eyes drift to Viper. “I was looking for Viper.”

Viper’s jaw tics, purposely not looking at Striker, and he licks his lips. “What else do you remember?”

“Maxim.” My face grows hot as I close my eyes, picturing the last moments before things when dark. I don’t want to tell Striker because I don’t want to embarrass Viper about why I was meeting him, but Maxim already found out. “He grabbed my shoulder scaring the shit out of me and asked what I was doing. I told him Viper needed help with vocab, and he laughed.”

“Asshole,” Viper snarls, his face growing red. “He knows I suck at French.”

“Go on,” Striker says, shooting a glare at Viper. “What else, kid?”

Kid.

Sometimes, most of the time, all the time, I hate being the youngest. I’m too young for real training, not yet fifteen like Striker. I can’t go to the yard or fight in the pit yet. I may be good with locks and languages, but I’m still too small, too young, and everyone treats me like I am.

I *hate* when Strike calls me kid. He’s only two years older.

And I really hate it when Viper does.

The worst part is I feel like a kid.

Especially right now.

“Focus, Break,” Viper says, gripping my arm to face him. “You’re getting all in your head.”

I blow out a breath, my cheeks puffing out as I blink to center my brain and focus on his blue eyes. “Maxim said something like, ‘Always the favorite. I can’t wait to see his face when he finds you.’”

“Who?” Viper snaps, gripping my arm tighter, the same moment Striker says, “Fuck.”

They exchange a look and bile burns my throat.

“We’re here, aren’t we?” I whisper, shrugging off Viper’s grip and turning in slow circles to look around. It’s just like Hunter said. Slightly dank. Thin trees and thick woods. Clearings that pop up out of nowhere. The craggy looking rocks.

The rocks should have told me right away.

That’s where Hunter told us they slept for a week. Until it was decided.

Seeker made the choice, he said. And Reaper refused to leave him behind, tying downed limbs with their laces to make a sled so they could drag his body back with them, risking bears and wild cats, after Hunter slit our brother’s throat.

Because that’s the only way to survive the wilderness.

Loyalty. Courage. Duty. Discipline. Honor. Respect.

That’s what we were taught and at the end of our training, we must prove we’re ready to be his soldiers with the ultimate sacrifice. Prove to our Father we are worthy.

Our father who’s tortured us, and killed us off, one by one.

“This is not fucking happening,” Viper says, but I barely hear him.

My limbs grow heavy, my shoulders drooping from the weight of the realization. The words Hunter whispered to me that night Reaper and him returned, come back, making my stomach churn.

My eyes dart to Viper. Pain stabs into my chest.

Our father sent us out here, to the wilderness, untrained, unprepared, and too young, forcing us to make a choice.

Three go in but only two come out.

We’re here for our final test.

We must make a choice.

We are either killers or the one who is killed.

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Chapter 8

Breaker

IT RAINED LATE LAST night, leaving the world a dull gray. Instead of washing away the ugliness of last night and cleansing the earth, the ground is muddy, saturated with swirling black water, splashes of dark mud marring the white marble chips in the garden beyond the drive. Wet leaves float in the dark puddles in the stretch of lawn toward the cliffs overlooking the sea. Bitter winds blew in overnight, churning the ocean, waves spraying over the cliffs.

Outside the library window matches how I feel. Gray. Angry. Like the sun set yesterday and won't ever shine brightly again and the waves will always beat against the jagged rocks like angry fits, in a rage now that she's gone.

Not like we deserve anything brilliant and happy. Delilah does though. Cora certainly.

Just not us.

"She tried to run."

I don't bother turning from the window as Viper walks in. My muscles ache with fatigue. my head hurts, and I'm so swallowed up with guilt, I can't bare to see any of his.

Father left last night, but sleep was impossible. I don't think any of us did. He left after he had come into our house, drug our fucking hearts through the mud, then told us to clean ourselves up, and keeping moving.

Because he knew, he knows, we will. We'll do everything he asks, like we always do.

Like he trained us, beat into us. We just accept his rule like fucking spineless followers because we're too scared of what he'll do to us if we don't.

I'm tired of following his command. I'm tired of worrying that one of us will suffer if we don't listen.

Now Cora's the one suffering and the thought that his sick control over us is now affecting her makes me want to scream. Rage.

I lean over, and grip the windowsill, my chest tight with fury. My finger taps the wood, as I collect myself, trying my best not to slip over into the rage I felt earlier.

It does none of us any good.

"Did you hear me?" Viper asks, his boots scrapping on the rough wood floor as he stops behind me. "Delilah went searching for keys and tried to—"

"Do you fucking blame her?" I ask, standing upright. I shake my head. I'm not mad at him. Wait. Yes, I am. I'm mad at him as much as myself. As much as Strike and Reap. "We sent Cora away."

He makes a sound in his throat, and doesn't meet my eyes when I glance over my shoulder to look at his face. For someone so erratic and temperamental, Viper is a terrible fucking liar.

No. He's an accomplished liar. I'm just able to see through his bullshit.

I turn to face him, but his gaze drops. I angle in closer, using my height to crowd him, trying to force him to meet my eyes. "What's that face for?" I ask.

He shrugs, lifting one large shoulder.

"Viper," I say, keeping my voice even.

Another shrug. "I feel like shit," he says stepping away, eyes still downcast, as he settles into the wingback chair. Looking down at his hands, his fingers twist and stretch the fabric of his mask and some remote part of my brain worries that Delilah will walk into the room, but what does it matter anymore?

We're keeping her prisoner. She's not allowed to leave until we say so.

And we're not ready to move ahead, so her leaving isn't allowed. Delilah isn't prepared. Fuck, I don't think even Reaper is ready for the next step, much less the rest of us. We've only just accomplished the first task.

Get Delilah on our side, train her, and that just went to shit.

The second part can't begin until we've gone over all the details with her. And we can't do that until she's learned to listen. Follow our lead. Then we can sit her down and give her step by step instructions on what we need her to do.

A gross feeling, like slick vines, knot in my stomach at the thought of what we're going to ask her to do.

I can't believe we were okay with this plan. But then we agreed to it before we *knew* her.

My eyes float to the doorway. "Where is she?" I ask.

Viper scoffs, finally meeting my eyes. "If you follow the screaming, you'll find her in Reaper's room."

My brow lifts.

"He tied her to his bed so she wouldn't try to run again."

My shoulders slump. We just keep making things worse.

"She's never going to forgive us," Viper mumbles, dropping his head back and looking up at the ceiling.

I sink to the sofa next to his chair, stretching my legs out. Yeah. I think we just seriously fucked all the progress we made with her.

"We need to tell her," Viper says, rolling and unrolling his mask. "We need to tell Delilah why we sent Cora away. It's the only way we're going to get her back. She'll understand."

I take a deep breath. Maybe he's right. Maybe we just need to tell her the truth.

My conversation with her in the dining room slams back to me. She had been so upset that we kept things from her, trying to wait until she was ready and able to handle the scope of what her father is, but that had been a mistake. Assuming we knew what was best for her. Yet that's what we've always done. Assume we know the correct way of doing everything.

I glance back at Viper to find his eyes pinned to the sofa across from us. My gaze drifts over, snagging on something tucked between the seat cushions. I lean forward, seeing it's a slip of pink fabric.

Cora's underwear. Tossed aside and discarded like they didn't hold her most intimate places, covering them up and keeping them from us. But

then we stripped them off and tossed them aside like they were nothing.

Like *she* was nothing.

I squeeze my eyes closed, my shoulders slumping.

I was trying so hard not to hurt her. All of us were. The thought of our Little Red scared and confused—alone— was so unbearable that none of us could follow through with Reaper's orders. Not even he could, the manipulative ass.

Cora is tough, but so delicate in many ways, and so different from Delilah. Parchment paper skin covering steel bones. But I think when I was trying to keep from scaring her, or harming her even more, I forgot that that this all we know how to do. We take. We consume. We break apart and rip away and fucking ruin lives. We don't protect. We aren't given jobs to rescue people. Fallon trained us from an early age to be brutal in every single way. Every order meant to destroy.

That's all we've done with them. With Delilah and Cora. We stripped them bare, forced them to accept us, trust us, then fucked them over in every sense of the word. And those pretty pink panties I loved so much symbolize all we've done to them.

In my need, in my total desire to consume them, I didn't even hesitate to break them in ways that maybe aren't repairable. All I wanted so badly was to have them. Taste them. Own them. And the worst part is, they let us.

And now this.

Cora gone. Delilah devastated.

And imagine, just yesterday morning I was fucking content with who I've become.

Breaker.

Of things, of men.

Of pretty, innocent women if it means I get what I want.

"Breaker?"

My eyes dart to his, the turquoise blue so vibrant against the dull gray in the room. Like he shines with star-kissed life.

His brows knit. "Care to share with me where that mind of yours just traveled to?"

After everything we've been through, Viper can read me so clearly. And I him. We all can. When you survive hell together, the bond that's created is more than a brotherhood. It's a metal chain linking us together,

sewn to our bones with the vile things we've survived and other people's blood.

Viper's plush lips turn down. The urge to lean over and suck that top lip into my mouth, taste his breath as it fans my face makes me look away.

I'm so rattled, so upset that I feel out of control of my body and my mind. When I feel like this, that tight strangled stretching under my ribcage, I know I'm too close to the edge and need some space.

"Where's Strike?" I ask, avoiding the topic of my scrambled thoughts.

My stomach lurches. *Shit.* I still haven't gone to check on him. He's probably a mess. When Striker makes a promise, he keeps it even if it costs him more than he's getting in return. And the fact he promised our Little Red she wasn't going back must be ripping him apart.

On top of the fact, we just went her back to the man who killed Hunter. The one man Striker refused to admit to himself, to Hunter, to anyone, he was completely in love with. Part of me wonders if that's why he's thrown himself in so deep with Delilah and Cora. He knows what it's like to lose something before you can make it yours.

Maybe we all should take a chance and dive in. Truly take our girls and everything they could be to us. Not just a means to an end, not just a mission, not just an obsession we'd fed and fed and fed.

But really *have* them. Really give ourselves over to them too. However that may look.

Viper groans, scrubbing a hand over his jaw. "Last I saw him, he was trying to talk to her, but she was screaming so loud, I dared not go in the room."

He rubs his eyes and stretches. With bags under his eyes, and face drawn tight, he looks just as exhausted and upset as I feel. My hands itch to reach for him. But I don't. I don't because I think he'd let me touch him, bury my face in his neck. And I'm not sure I'd stop there.

Neither one of us deserves the luxury of comfort right now. Not when Cora is enduring god knows what.

Pushing up from the sofa, I snag Cora's underwear from between the cushions and pocket them before walking toward the door.

"Where are you going?" Viper asks.

"I need to check on Strike." I pause in the doorway, looking back over my shoulder. "Have you seen Reap?"

He shakes his head, expression dour. “Not since he informed me she tried to run and to leave her until she learned her lesson.”

What a clusterfuck.

I’m so sick of breaking things. For once I’d love to fix something. A mistake. A heart. Right a wrong without violence or blood. My entire life I’ve been told there’s only dark, monstrous things inside me. That I’m just like my father. I’m not him. Even though he trained me to be just like him, nothing about my mind or my soul match his. Fallon is cruel and controlling. He uses affection as tool. My brother’s safety as a punishment when I don’t do exactly as instructed.

I may have my father’s eyes, but I don’t have his heart.

They do.

I have to make this right.

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Chapter 9

Striker

MY VISION BLURS IN and out in time with my heartbeat. Blackness invades my mind, then it fades and all I can see is Hunter's face as we left him to die.

All because of me.

This feels like it's all my fault. Again.

My head drops forward and I rest it on my forearm slung over my knees, trying to force the image from my mind. Lifting my head, I glance at the door next to me as I stretch my legs, debating going back into Reaper's room, but I'm not sure if that would help or hurt the situation.

Delilah stopped yelling when she first saw me, but that lasted all of two seconds. It was the tears that made me want to untie her, but Reaper would have my head. She's still learning. And she has to understand that even if she can't see it now, everything we do is for a reason.

Fuck. I sound like Fallon. Justifying. But it's true. She has to learn to obey, to follow every command, or this will never work. It will fall apart the second she doesn't listen.

As much as I want to leave and get Cora, we aren't ready. Cora is smart. Cunning. Fragile in so many ways, but strong enough to survive the storm until we can get to her.

She has to.

I'll never forgive myself if she doesn't.

Reaper. Just the thought of how he'd unravel sends a slick sensation coiling through my gut. If something happens to her, he'll fucking go over the edge completely. This entire mission was partly his plan. Fallon only agreed because he knows how ruthless Reaper can be when he wants something. And he wants Rune to pay.

"To think she's all tied up and we can't even play with her."

I glance up from the floor and see Breaker shutting the door to Viper's room, a grim expression on his face. I hadn't even noticed him slip past me and go into his room. I really need to sleep.

I shake my head, trying to clear it, and my head swims a little from the movement. I've not slept, maybe a few minutes at a time in fits and starts. My eyes sting from lack of sleep, and I rub them, trying to focus. I've been stuck in my head. Too lost in memories to give a fuck about much of anything. Too miserable from watching Cora being dragged away to care that we had to abide by Fallon's orders.

Had to. As if we had no say in the matter.

As if we had no *choice.*

"We had to send her, you know," Breaker says like he's reading my mind. Or maybe he feels as much guilt as I do and is trying to justify why we allowed her to go.

He slides down the wall, sitting next to me, hip to hip, thigh pressed against mine. He's so much like Viper in some ways. Needing contact with one of us when he's feeling overwhelmed. Reaper's always kept us at arm's length and the three of us have clung to one another all these years. Maybe that's why I've always had this lingering want inside me. We've been through hell together and Viper and Breaker are the only ones who know what it feels like to come out alive.

The side of his boot taps mine, and I look over at him. He's watching my mouth the way he watches Vipers when he doesn't think anyone's looking.

I draw my knees up to my chest, rubbing my face again. "Did we?" I ask. His pale blue eyes dart away. He feels guilty too. Good. He should. We all should.

But Father's orders still stand and we're expected to abide by them.

I rub my eyes, like I can rub away this deep exhaustion resting in my bones. I'm sick of blindly abiding by his orders. Sick of this life. We've had only a handful of missions the last few years, giving us a break, but I can

still taste the acidic savagery of each mission on my tongue. Feel that bitter dread of receiving a text with nothing but coordinates and a code word. Red: shoot on sight—my specialty. Yellow: extract and hold. Blue: Gather target and intel. Then later after we arrive, another text with the name and a picture of our target. Then we move in and do as ordered.

Delilah was simple. We had formed a plan that would ensure Rune's downfall.

We take her and make her ours.

And we did.

Turn her against him.

We did that too.

But now it's ruined because we're fucking—

"We're idiots to have thought we could get away with keeping her." Breakers' frustrated words echo in my head. He shifts and the back of his head *thunks* against the wall. Exhaustion is etched into his features as he stares at the ceiling. "We're fools to think we could keep them both, like pretty pets."

You know that's not what this is. I don't say it. There's no need. You can't observe, track, learn about someone for so long and think of them as just pets.

No.

Not pets.

Our obsession. We sat on rooftops, in cars, followed them down the street—stalking them—keeping track of their whereabouts even when we weren't around or just one of us was on duty. Most of the time, between jobs, we would all sit and watch. Then we'd take breaks in shifts when we knew they were settled in for the night in case Rune did something that would give us a hint of what he was doing.

If they knew about it.

If she knew.

She was the key to bringing down Rune.

We took notes of their fucking every move to use later on when we needed Delilah's compliance. What they ate, what perfume they wore, who they dated and how often they went to the doctor. They become the center of everything.

They become ours. Fucking *ours*. Our everything. Our fuckups. Our hopes. These two women represent everything we've always wanted.

Revenge, ruin, fucking *peace*, and now we have neither of them, Everything is falling apart because of our selfish desires.

Fallon always feared Rune would slip over and take things too far. That's part of why he took that mission, even when he knew it would fracture their alliance. Little did he know it was his actions that would be the Rune descended into madness.

It wasn't until years later, after we got an inside source, and we could gather intel on his movements that we learned the details of his actions. How he was funneling money and who he was working with. Who the members were and where they lived. How many times they visited. How many hunts he held in a single year. If it weren't for our inside source, we'd never have gotten the information or images from the inside.

Now we have it all, and the plan?

Put the one thing we worked so hard to get in danger.

A soft sob slips out from under the bedroom door and my heart cracks a little more. If only we weren't such selfish bastards. But we always have been. I should know by now to expect less from us all.

"Have you seen Reap?" Breaker asks, pulling me back to reality.

I shake my head, sucking in a breath to focus. My lungs fill with his scent, making my senses rush with awareness. Earthy and fresh, that's how he smells. Like a spring day with a slight sweet almond aftertaste, hinted with oak and so wholly consuming, I can't help but think of how he must taste.

"Since he left her here?" Breaker's brows knit as he looks at me, like he can't figure out why I'm acting so strangely. Probably a good thing, considering I'm thinking about his cock.

"About an hour ago," I say, trying to brush the image of Viper sucking him off from my head. "But not since he told me she was tied to his bed and to leave her as he was walking out the door."

His full lips quirk. "Viper said she tried to run."

"Found the SUV and the keys," I tell him.

"We know she's resourceful and determined."

"And we know she'd do anything for Cora."

Breaker sighs. "Let's hope that's true, and she cooperates soon."

"Yeah. I'm not sure how long Cora will last at the hands of Rune and Zane."

“Fuck,” Breaker mutters, tapping the back of his head against the wall, then stands up with a grunt. He reaches for the door, but I grab his calf, stopping him.

“Mask,” I say, slipping mine over my head on instinct, then remember I don’t have to.

She knows me.

No. She doesn’t know me. She’s seen me. There’s a difference.

Breaker ignores me and pushes the door open.

I hear her scream out a venomous stream of curses, but her words cut off abruptly. When I enter the room behind him, I almost laugh at her expression. Mouth open, eyes moving over his features like she’s trying to see every hard line and smooth curve all at once. I’m so used to seeing him, I forget. Breaker is probably the most beautiful man I’ve ever seen, almost feline in his perfection. Far more than even Reaper, and that’s a hard task.

He leans down and grabs her by the back of her neck. Delilah’s eyes flare wide with shock. “You don’t leave,” he growls. “You are ours, Tiny Thing. Remember?”

Her mouth opens again, but this time she exhales, her chest sinking in defeat. “Seriously?”

Breaker glances my way.

“That’s what you look like?” Our Princess squirms, thighs pressing together. “This whole time, you’ve been keeping *that* face hidden?”

My laughter earns me a smirk from Breaker. Then he leans down, placing a kiss on her forehead, but his voice still has the dominant edge when he says, “Say it. Tell me you won’t try to leave again.”

Delilah nods, her gaze hungrily taking in every feature.

“Say it,” he demands.

“Okay,” she breathes. “My god, I won’t try to leave.”

Her response eases the tension in his shoulders, but he rolls them like he does right before we’re about to move in on a target, and my body goes rigid.

“We had to send her back because of a deal,” Breaker says, “We had no choice.”

“What deal?” Delilah asks the same moment I say, “Not a good time, Breaker.”

She tenses, her muscles straining against the tight restraints, trying to sit upright, but Reaper has her tied so tight she can’t move an inch. We’re

going to have to let her go soon before she loses circulation. “A good time for what? Tell me what you mean.”

His shoulders rise and fall with a deep breath.

“Break…” I try to say gently, placing my hand on his shoulder, but I know it comes out like a warning. She’s already upset, upset with us, and this will just send her over the edge. Telling her won’t ease his guilt. It’ll just piss her off even more.

He shrugs me off. “Rune made a deal a with Devin.” When her brows knit, he continues, “To combine the families.”

“He’s marrying her off,” Delilah says, more to herself. I see the moment it all crashes into her. Her gorgeous features contort, mouth pulling into a frown, brows furrowing. “The Devin family. Rune’s marrying her off to Zane to keep the families connected.”

Breaker says nothing and I know better than to say a damn thing.

“You sent my Cora back to marry Zane fucking Devin?” Her scream nearly makes my ears bleed. All shock at seeing Breaker’s face leaves as she writhes, trying to free herself. “You bastard,” she seethes, fury turning her cheeks red. Princess jerks and thrashes against the restraints, her feet kicking out in desperation like a wild animal and I worry she’s going to hurt herself. “You’re all bastards!”

We are. Fucking bastards who vowed to protect Cora then broke it less than twenty-four hours later.

Princess screams, this feral, ungodly sound that rips through me with its intensity, but suddenly, it stops and she stills. Tears roll down her cheeks and I think witnessing this utter heartbreak is far worse punishment than Fallon’s belt or solitary. Worse than anything, I’ve been handed so far.

Breaker kneels by the bed and gently wipes away her tears. She pulls away, but only half-heartedly, her body limp with anguish.

“Why?” Hot tears stream down her cheeks, leaving a trail of salt and sorrow. “Why did you have to send her? What power does he have over you?”

Father, she means. What power does he hold? Funny. I never questioned why we listen to Fallon. He holds power over us because we gave it to him.

Just like he trained us.

Breaker’s eyes close and when they open again, I see that familiar look of determination he gets right before he does something stupid.

Or brave.

He unties the leather bindings around her wrists and rubs them tenderly, helping her sit up, before pulling her into his lap. She's still sobbing uncontrollably, a mess of limbs and pain in Breaker's arms. I want to lash out, punch something until my hands are bloody and bruised.

Myself. Right in the face.

We did this. Caused this pain.

She's absolutely devastated, and I can't even imagine what Cora must be feeling right now. It's been hours since Fallon took her, and she's back in Rune's clutches by now. God knows what he's doing to her.

Is he hurting her?

The thought alone makes me want to destroy everything in sight. I've been sitting around, feeling sorry for myself while god only knows what our Little Flower's enduring.

We need to make a plan.

"Tiny Thing," Breaker's gentle whisper cuts through the chaotic my panic building my gut. My vision clears and I see she's straddling him, her slight frame shaking with sobs. He wraps his muscular arms tightly around her, burying his nose in her hair. She clings to him like a lifeline. After a minute Breaker pulls back and cups her cheeks, searching her eyes. "What did I tell you?"

Delilah murmurs something I can't hear, and she falls apart again.

Breaker has a big heart. He's loyal to a fault. He loves all of us ferociously, but we don't get this. This gentleness. We just get Breaker and his snarky remarks and quiet laughter.

He nestles his nose to her, trailing soft kisses to her earlobe. I shouldn't be getting hard, but I can't help it. The only time I've ever seen him like this was the other night, and I want to see more. As selfish as it is, I want some of it for myself.

He whispers in her ear and her whole body stills. She nods. When his lips land on hers, she arches up, meeting his kiss, parting her lips to let him slip his tongue deeper. I feel like I'm invading on something private, and I take a step back, but his hand latches on to my belt, keeping me in place, letting me, wanting me, to be a part of this tenderness.

When he breaks the kiss, he lets me go, then runs his hand over her long black hair. "Be a good girl, Tiny Thing."

She nods, more tears slipping free, but she swipes them away, her beautiful features growing softer.

"Promise?"

She licks her lips, nodding. "Promise."

He places her back on the bed and stands, reaching behind him. The metal rings glint in the light. Now I know why he was in Viper's room.

Shit. He just calmed her down, and she's going to be even more pissed. Breaker grabs her wrist and slaps the handcuff around it. She stares at it blankly, then up at him right before he pulls her arm up to the headboard and snaps the other end in place, cuffing her to the bed.

"What are you doing?" she asks, looking over at me like I'm going to help her.

Her expression of shock makes me stifle a chuckle. I shake my head. "Didn't I warn you what happens to naughty girls who try to run?"

That clouded, sweet, slightly confused look vanishes, and her mouth thins to a straight line, her face contorting with anger. "Assholes."

His stark, wintery eyes meet mine, and for the first time since I watched Cora get dragged away, I feel a tiny spark of hope. Breaker earned his name for a reason. He may be the youngest out of us, but he's also far braver in many ways, standing up to Fallon when even Reaper cannot.

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Chapter 10

Delilah

THE SKY OUTSIDE THE window turns brighter, the dark clouds moving out, revealing a bright blue sky. Sunlight filters through the panned glass, dust floating in the lines of bright light. I reposition myself, the metal cuff slinking and sliding down with me as I sprawl out on Reaper's bed, Breaker's words ringing in my head.

I close my eyes and let out a frustrated sigh. The two left me about twenty minutes ago, but I've been here long enough that I get it. I can't leave. They want me here, need me to fulfill whatever plan they have. Reaper and Striker both admitted they need my cooperation. To follow orders. How many times was I told this? It's only taken me three weeks, but I realize that's what they've been doing with me all along.

Training me.

I'm theirs. I belong, in every sense of the word, to four controlling men, hellbent on getting revenge on my father. And I will do as they tell me or pay for it.

Like right now. They warned me they would tie me up if I tried to leave. Warned me that I would receive a punishment if I disobeyed. And here I am, suffering the consequences of my own actions while Cora suffers because of everyone else's.

Tears prick at my eyes. I grind my teeth, annoyed by their appearance yet again. Crying won't help, yet I've never felt so helpless. So useless. Even in the weeks here, before I knew them, I only felt this utterly

powerless exactly two times, and that was from a lack of control over my body.

This time I'm powerless to do anything to help Cora, and it makes my heart clench with anguish. And in the back of my mind, there's that slight fear staining every thought. What if they never plan to get her back?

God. They better not be lying.

Any of them.

Reaper's ominous words echo in my head, reminding me they have a plan for me. *Yet.* That's what Reaper said. I can't go back *yet*. That means he plans to send me back to Rune armed with knowledge and…

I don't know. But I focus on the single word. *Yet.* If I cooperate, give them what they want, I'll be sent back. Then I can get to Cora, make sure she's safe, force Rune to call off the marriage, and then I'll deal with the lodge.

Or maybe I'll just go back, snatch her up and run. Back here? My mind instantly conjures up this mansion as our destination and maybe it's because I know we'll be safe with the four men who claimed us. I don't know if I'm ready to admit that this deep longing wrapping around my ribs, taking control of all my senses when they're near means I want to be here.

Before I can delve too deeply into that line of thinking, the door opens and Viper's imposing figure fills the space, a dark and lethal energy exuding from him. He's not as tall as Breaker or Reaper, maybe even an inch or two shorter than Striker, but he takes up just as much space. Possibly even more.

My gaze devours him, taking in every detail. His skull mask with the fangs that seem so fitting now. The tight black shirt and how it looks like it was poured over him, outlining every chiseled muscle. My eyes trail to the fatigues, straining along his thighs and bunching at his black boots, hugging his thick calves. As he saunters forward, with so much arrogance in each step, I remember I'm pissed at him.

All of them.

Except Breaker.

"Still thinking about running, Sweetheart?" he asks, stopping next to the bed and looking down at me with those eyes that seem to shift with his every emotion. He hooks his thumbs in his belt loops and my eyes snag on his erection pinned to his thigh, trapped under his tight pants.

Between my legs throbs at the sight and I know they've claimed my mind and body. I'm bound to a bed, and my only thought is how it would feel to have Viper slide my dress up and slip a hand between my legs. Shove his thick, delicious dick in my mouth while he fingers me.

"Oh Sweetheart, you have that look," Viper murmurs seductively, trailing a finger along my stomach.

The last time I was alone with Viper…

Shit. The knife. The one I stole from him.

"Ah, there it is," Viper says with a chuckle. "Our little thief just realized she was caught."

I gasp as he grips my throat, leaning over me. That throbbing doesn't stop. It intensities.

"Do you know what we do to thieves?" he asks, mouth so close to mine I wish he didn't have his mask on so our lips would brush.

"Tie them up?" I guess. My heart races as Viper's grip tightens around my throat, his hot breath brushing against my face. Citrusy and clean, yet lined with fire.

Something dangerous, completely untamed, glimmers in his eyes. "We cut off their hands."

I feel the color drain from my face.

"But our pretty girl needs both her hands," he continues, standing upright and slipping his palm down my belly, letting it trail over my mound to my thigh, then down to my knee and lower to my boot. "She has four cocks to tend to."

My cheeks flame, which is absurd considering, but I can't help but feel not exactly embarrassed, but like it wasn't exactly me. It was some other version of me with them. That feral woman who got so caught up in their promises and emotions she thinks I belong to them, and more importantly, wants to be theirs.

Wants to feel safe and secure.

Wants that dark, heady feeling of being the objects of their desire.

"You never gave me my knife back," I tell him, my tone snarky, defensive, as if this alone excuses my thievery.

He doesn't respond, just inhales deeply and retrieves a key from his pocket. The metal clinks as he unlocks it and I sit upright, rubbing my wrist, eyeing him warily.

“Come,” he says, taking my hand and leading me to the door. My heart races with uncertainty as we approach his bedroom, but I follow half curious, half scared of why we’re going to his bedroom, when I remember his naughty drawer.

“Why are we going to your room?” I ask, my voice breathy just thinking about why he wants me in his room, but we’re at his bedroom door and he’s pushing it open and guiding me to his armoire, storing all the knives.

Viper flings the doors open, positioning me before the collection, then moves behind me, resting his hands possessively on my hips, and pulling me against his chest. An arm snakes around my middle, his hard length pressing to my lower back. His masked face dips, brushing into my hair at my neck, murmuring something unintelligible in a low voice that sends shivers down my spine.

As he stands upright, I grip his hand at my waist, feeling small so pressed against him. “What are we doing?”

“First, if you want a knife, you pick it,” he says. He gestures to the array of knives. “Which one do you want, *mo leannan*?”

“I pick one?” I ask, even as I’m already studying each knife, searching for one similar to the little knife he gave me. Other than the one in my boot, I don’t see anything close. My gaze snags on a small hunting knife about three inches long with a hilt short enough for my smaller hands. I point to the knife. “That one.”

He makes a guttural sound. “After my heart.” He lets me go and plucks the knife from the display, removing it from its sheath. “Good pick.”

He slips it out and shows me the blade. It’s sleek, deadly, the dim light glinting off the metal. I touch the edge and pain slices through the tip of my finger. I pull my hand back, hissing out a sharp breath. A slice of blood forms on my fingertip.

“Just like you to reach for the knife’s edge,” Viper chuckles, re-sheathing the blade and tossing it to the bed behind me. He grips my wrist with one hand and raises his mask to expose his mouth as he brings my finger to his lips. My stomach flutters at the sight of his lips against my skin as he skates his tongue over the cut, sucking on it gently.

The groan he emits is almost savage in its obvious lust. Between my legs throbs, some primal thing awakening as I watch him taste my blood, all anger, all *thoughts*, melting away.

“This knife is yours when you learn how to use it,” he grates, letting my finger go with a slick pop and lets his mask fall down again.

This man is an absolute menace—all seduction and sin and unbridled want. It’s like that want, that desperate need, seeps into me, and the urge to have his mouth on me in other places has me leaning toward him, angling my body so all of my soft curves touch his hard planes.

“You said first,” I whisper, tilting my head back to meet his eyes, my breaths coming jagged with each exhale. “What’s second?”

Viper dips his head, his hot breath tickling my ear. “What did I say happened to thieves?”

I bite my lip, breathing hard now. My eyes drop to his erection, every cell in my body lit up with a deep-seated hunger to be claimed again.

“Naughty girl. I can see in your eyes how you want me to fuck you,” he grates. Heat pools between my thighs as his hand snakes around my throat, the other weaving into my hair, tugging my head back sharply. “You’re thinking about how you want me to bend you over my bed and spank your pretty ass until it’s bright pink and your panties are so wet they’re sticking to the soft, sweet petals of your pussy.”

My breath rushes out, hands skimming over his abs like I’ve lost all control of them. And I think I have. Control over my body, my mind. The only thing that matters is him.

“Then you want me to tug your soaking wet panties aside and play with your pussy, and taste how badly you want my cock, don’t you?”

I wasn’t before, but I am now.

“Tell me, Sweetheart, do naughty little thieves deserve to have their pussy pet? To made to feel good?”

Yes, my body screams, aching for his hands on me, but I shake my head because, no, they don’t.

“No, pretty girl, they don’t. They get punished.”

With a harsh tug, Viper yanks me toward his bed, and I’m shoved face down onto the mattress, my arms flailing out in shock. His hips pin me in place while his grip on my hair forces my cheek to the bed, and his other leaves my throat, moving slowly down my back to press into my ass crack. I groan, my body lit up and desperate, wanting a repeat of the other night. I push back against him, feeling his thick cock press into my rear.

“Fuck,” he grates out, releasing me. “You’re so eager for someone who’s in so much trouble. Be a good girl and place your hands next to your

head. Palms flat."

I know this game, so I hesitate, but that just seems to tick up his feral energy.

A rumbling growl comes from his chest. "Do it, Sweetheart, before you make me angry."

I do as instructed, my heart a beating drum against the mattress even though there's a part of me that wants to defy him. When my dress lifts, the beating turns to thundering, my thighs pressing together, a shameless hunger throbbing between my legs. My body is primed, ready. Already knowing that while I've been punished for not listening, I've also been rewarded.

"Good girl," he purrs, sending electric heat through my body. His fingers inch under the waistband of my panties and pull. I greedily help him by lifting away from the mattress and stepping out of them. "Now count for me, Sweetheart."

The first slap to my rear is so harsh the flesh stings, pain radiating to my thigh. I yelp, my fingers curling into the bedding, then hiss out a long breath, saying between clenched teeth, "One."

"Such a good girl," he whispers, voice like silk. Another lands even harder on my other ass cheek.

"Shit!" I scream, bucking forward, then lick my lips, acutely aware of the faint ache that tingles with smokey desire, making my pussy clench, needing to ease a different type of pain. "Two."

The next one is even harder, and I cry out again, then whimper out the number, that tingling sensation growing, turning into a hollowness. The next few are just as hard and by the time we reach ten, tears sting my eyes and I'm pressing my forehead to the mattress, breathing in and out slowly, trying to remain still, but it's hard to focus on anything other than the new, *wanting* pain Viper's creating.

I stole. I broke into their rooms. They have told me what would happen.

If I listen, I'll be rewarded.

If I listen, I get Cora.

Viper groans, gripping both my ass cheeks, rubbing the stinging flesh like he can rub the pain to a soothing dullness. I squirm under him, feeling the wetness dampening my inner thighs. Even as hard as the spanking was, I'm still thrumming, left wanting. So needy, I'm dripping wet. So desperate

for him to touch that cutting ache between my legs. The idea that I'm this aroused after he spanked me so hard feels vulgar, which just adds to the fire searing in my veins.

I want to be fucked. Brutally. Be completely ravaged. Not like how we did the other night. Dirtier. Taken hard and rough. I want his fingers in my ass, his cock driving into me so hard it hurts. Not the barely noticeable twinge that mingles with pleasure, but the genuine, throbbing torment that dances on the periphery of cutting. The one that would make tears form and fear skitter up my spine.

"You did so well," he coos right as his finger skims over my wetness. "Oh, Sweetheart," he grates, finger dragging the evidence of my arousal up my ass crack. I tilt for him, pressing my forehead to the bed, a strangled sound escaping my lips as he rubs my wetness into my hole. My fingers curl into the bedding, resisting reaching behind me to spread my ass cheeks for him. "You're such a dirty girl squirming, wanting me, your ass so red and fuckable."

I nod, whimpering. I am. I'm filthy and obviously fucked in the head. And I don't care. "Please," I whisper. "Please fuck me. I don't care which hole you fuck."

"Jesus," he hisses out. "Don't tempt me, *mo leannan*. I want that ass so bad it hurts."

"Take it," I whisper, barely even recognizing myself. The need to be consumed, the craving to be owned, devours me from within. *Give me anything.* I need anything to make this hurt go away, even if it's just for a few minutes. Even if it maims me. I just desperately need something to fill this crater inside me.

I'm feel so empty without her.

"Viper, please, fuck me." I arch my back for him. Reaching behind me to touch his hands on my rear. "Take me."

"Fuck," he grates. I feel his head press into my shoulder blades as he kneads my ass harder. Viper drags his hands up my body as he stands back, cock rocking into my ass like he's dreaming of taking it out and fucking me. "You beg so sweetly."

I widen my stance, getting up on my elbows to look over my shoulder at him. He steps back, hands dropping to squeeze his hardness through his pants. When he takes another step back, that ache widens, ripping open my chest until my ribs feel cracked.

“You want my cock, Sweetheart?” Viper grates, that sensual purr leaving, replaced with a stoney snarl. “In your ass? In your mouth? That pretty slick pussy?”

His hands drop. My chest squeezes painfully, because I already know what he’s going to say. And it hurts. Rejection from Viper hurts.

“You don’t get my cock again until you can follow orders,” he says, walking backwards toward the door. “Show us you can do as instructed and you can have us in every tight hole.”

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Chapter 11

Cora

SUNLIGHT LEAKS THROUGH THE large windows in the kitchen overlooking the brilliant blue ocean. My chest pangs with hurt, thinking of Viper's blue eyes and the dark troubled sea that churred beyond the mansion.

Last night, sleep didn't come easy. The familiar tendrils of dread slithered back into my core the moment they left me last night. That oily, suffocating sensation that once gripped me now coils tighter. Even though I knew Clyde was in the room across the hall, I was still scared to fall asleep. Scared that Rune would come in to question me further or worse. I wouldn't put it past him to hold me down and fuck me in my childhood bed.

In the past, I had resigned myself to being Rune's plaything without hope of escape. I was trapped. Used. Abused.

His.

But now I know a soft touch and hungry need that doesn't scald me with resentment. How it feels to be touched with care and tenderness. What it feels like to be treated well. My needs taken care of and not as foreplay right before the random man I picked out for the evening rammed his dick in me and got off way too fast. I know what it feels like to be kissed, like I'm truly desired. Soft and sweet and full of promise.

Promises they better keep.

Reaper's going to get me.

He promised.

Every time I repeat the words in my mind, a deep emptiness carves a hole in my chest, echoing the way lies tend to.

I scrub my hands over my face, the lingering anger toward Clyde gnawing at my insides. Anger toward Rune. Life. On top of it, my head hurts. My arm hurts. Actually, everything hurts this morning, my heart the worst.

“Any word?” Rune strides into the kitchen, the scent of his musky cologne mingling with the aroma of brewing coffee. His fingers fumble with the buttons of his suit jacket as he leans over to place a kiss on the top of my head like he didn’t hold me down and have my doctor examine me without my consent.

It’s so typical of him. Pretending as if last night didn’t happen. Just like he always did after he fucked me. It’s heavy, holding the vile deeds of others. It suffocates all the good things left inside a person until they’re drowning in the sickness.

“No,” Clyde tells him, pulling a coffee mug from the cabinet and setting it on the counter for Rune.

I told Clyde I wasn’t hungry, but guilt must have turned him into a chef, because he’s currently making me eggs I don’t want. His arms flex as he scoops eggs from the pan onto a plate. A simple t-shirt under his blazer replaces his usual attire of tailored suits today, the material clinging to his toned back. Faded jeans hug his strong legs. I rarely see Clyde so casually dressed, which means he doesn’t plan on joining Rune at the office today.

Lucky me. I get to spend my day with Clyde.

“Have you heard from Snyder at all?” Rune asks him, petting my head before he walks to the coffeepot. I resist swiping at my hair.

Screaming.

Crying.

Instead, I say, “I thought we settled the Snyder deal?”

I can pretend too. I’ve gotten good at it. Sweeping bad things under the carpet and pretending they don’t exist.

But I remember.

I just file it away for later.

Clyde glances over his shoulder. “Rune presented another deal and they’re sitting on it.”

“Deal?” I ask, forgetting I was mad. Delly and I worked so hard to cover up whatever Rune was actually buying, that every detail has etched

itself in my mind. “We bought their entire chain of hotels. What else do they have?”

Rune glances at Clyde but says nothing.

I give wide eyes to Rune as he pours himself a cup of coffee, then turns to place the carafe back.

“Well?” I ask. It’s obvious this isn’t something they want to discuss, but I push on, “Anyone? If I’m going to be spending my days covering up illegal shit, then at least I should know what crimes I’m committing.”

Rune whips around so fast, his coffee sloshes out of his mug on to his hand. He exhales a sharp hiss and slaps it down on the on the counter, reaching for a napkin. Blue eyes laser in on me. “You’ve become quite bold for a girl who was held hostage for three weeks.”

I hold his gaze, daring him to be cruel in front of Clyde. They may be lifelong friends, but Clyde does not know what Rune is really like.

“Cora,” Clyde warns, glaring at me.

Rune brushes past, saying over his shoulder to Clyde, “Get me the RSVP list for the event. I want to make sure one of their guys is attending.”

“Event?” I ask.

“Zane’s annual fundraiser,” Clyde says. “And yes, you’re expected to attend.”

“I’m not fucking going,” I say, crossing my arms like a defiant child. The thought of spending an evening at Zane’s stupid fundraiser makes me want to slam my face into the table until I’m unconscious.

Every year, Zane holds a fundraiser for some random cause and invites all his friends and associates. Delly and I sign the checks for Rune, and most times, we attend the function long enough to shake a few hands and pose for the cameras before we slip out. I hate his fundraisers as much as I can’t stand him.

Clyde steps over, placing a plate of scrambled eggs in front of me. He points to his runny eggs. “Shut up and eat.”

My teeth grind together as I lock eyes with him. His intense, penetrating gaze warns me to tread carefully. When he gets like this, I know better than to push.

Deflating, I uncross my arms and angrily snatch up my napkin. “Your eggs suck,” I mumble. “Where’s Claudia?”

Clyde picks up the fork and hands it to me after the front door slams shut, telling me Rune’s gone. He lifts his chin toward the front of the house.

“He fired all his staff except for Conner.”

“His driver?” I ask, shocked. “Why did he let everyone go?”

Clyde raises one brow, silently asking me, *Why do you think?* “He’d have fired me if he could.”

“He can’t fire you. You’re his closest friend.”

“Precisely,” Clyde says, “but his paranoia is through the roof.”

I lean back in my seat, looking back out the large windows. That explains why Rune was getting his own coffee this morning. He’s let his entire staff go. That also explains why I didn’t see any security detail. Rune must be so worried about everyone he’s surrounded himself with that he isn’t sure who to trust. The men he obviously has a history with walked into his club and fucked us. *After* one of the club’s security guards let us all into a VIP lounge. These men know people and it’s obvious they planned this.

Our last night with them flashes through my mind. I rake my hands through my hair, trying to stop the flood of memories. I’ve never in my life felt so possessed. So owned.

So safe.

Looking back on that night we spent with them in the club, I can’t help but think about how Reaper was with Delly. Possessive in almost a cruel, slightly unhinged way. How Viper and Breaker were with us both, so hungry, so possessive.

How Viper kissed and consumed us like he was eating a meal he’d paid a fortune for, one he’s wanted, planned for, craved for years. How Striker barely contained his need as he watched me get fucked. The way he cherished Delly.

How Breaker touched me like he already knew me. Like we’d been lovers for years.

Hindsight is 20-20 and all, but I don’t think they realized just how much they were revealing in those hours we spent with them. Now that I’m sitting alone, away from them, waiting, I wonder how long they watched us.

Delly and I never discussed it, and I think we both avoided the topic because of what it meant, but these men knew us. In ways that men know lovers. How a person obsessed has a deep understanding of every detail about the object of their desire.

And right now, staring at my eggs through a haze of angry tears, I want nothing more than to be possessed by them again.

Maybe we were away too long, and we got caught up in some twisted romantic notion that the men took us because they craved us. It's possible we got messed up in the head because we were being held prisoner by the men we fucked. And who wouldn't? They are consuming in every way, taking over every sense. They are sex and sensuality in a dominant male form. Caring and protective. Mysterious and so erotically potent, my cheeks heat just thinking about them.

If we'd not met them that night, Delly and I never would have come together. We'd have not fucked at all if we'd not been taken. Surely we'd not have kissed if it weren't for that night in the club. We never would have done any of the things we've done if it weren't for those four men who have seriously fucked with my head to the point I don't know what's up from down or what's real.

No. That's not true. I know what's real.

Being in my childhood kitchen with Clyde, knowing I am expected to resume my role as Rune's secret keeper, money launderer, and secret whore, is very real.

And I have a new role.

Wife.

That's got to be the reason I'd be returned to Rune instead of Delly. And that's the only reason my implant would be removed. Last night, Rune said having it removed was part of the deal, which can only mean I'm expected to conceive.

The last several years flash through my mind, like a movie. All the dinners, all the parties, every time Rune would redirect Zane away from Delly. The irritated glances at Zane. They weren't because he feared Zane's intentions. He knew Delly was safe from him.

He knew because he'd already planned to sell me to the devil.

I didn't think it was possible, but my heart cracks open a little more.

Reaper, all of them, sent me back because I was promised to someone else.

Part of me fears that's why they took me. If this was all part of the plan. To make me fall, make promises they never intended to keep. That way, when the time came, they had a bargaining chip, and I wouldn't put up much of a fight because I truly believed them.

I was theirs, and they'd always come for me.

But here I am, being brought to slaughter like I mean nothing, presented as a whore to be used, as a womb to carry a child, a trophy to place on a shelf. Like I am nothing because they wanted Delly. I was nothing more than a bargaining chip.

I was expendable.

Because I would have to be returned, and Rune knew it. That's why he never came for us. Everyone knew it. You can't make this kind of deal between families, then just break it. And that silver-haired man… He knew it too.

That's why I'm here.

Rune had no choice but to let them keep Delly in exchange for me. I don't know what's more fucked up. That he let his blood go, his heir to the kingdom he built, or that he was too scared to lose it all. His money. His power. His control.

He chose his empire over his daughter.

The clattering sound of ceramic hitting the table jolts me from my thoughts. I glance over and see a steaming stack of fluffy pancakes.

My eyes slip up to Clyde's face. "You made pancakes?"

His brows knit, making the wrinkles around his eyes deepen. "Why do you look like these pancakes are about to make you cry?"

I swipe a tear from my cheek. *Because the meanest man I've ever met made me pancakes after he promised me I was his, then sent me away.*

My chin wobbles and I remind myself I'm not expendable, but that lie is starting to feel hollow. "I don't know if I like pancakes anymore."

"But you love pancakes." Clyde stabs the top two with a fork and places them on my plate next to my untouched eggs. He slathers butter over the top and hands me the syrup. "You love blueberry pancakes, and chocolate chip pancakes. Plain pancakes." He grabs my fork and hands it to me again. I take it weakly, swiping again at my cheek. "You like *all* pancakes."

I nod as I cry, because I do. I love pancakes. My father used to make them for me. It is the only good thing I remember about him.

Good. Nothing is good. I've never even had an ounce of goodness outside of the flimsy, trivial things that money can buy. The only good, substantial, permanent thing I've had is Delly and I don't have her.

My hand swipes across the table before I know what I'm doing and the plate crashes to the floor. Shards hit the wall, and scatter noisily across

the white tile floor.

"Which one?" I ask, my chair nearly topping over as I stand upright. "Which man am I supposed to marry?"

The way Clyde's chest expands on an inhale, and how his eyes drop, tells me I was right.

"Which family?" I ask, smacking my hand on the table to release some of this rage. I'm so sick of being controlled. "Or is it Rune I'm supposed to marry?"

Clyde recoils, his expression turning to disgust. "Why would you marry Rune?"

My laugh is so bitter is burns my throat.

"Cora," Clyde barks, grabbing my arm. "Why, in god's name, would Rune want to marry you?"

"Why do you *think*?" My voice cracks, pain spilling out. Clyde loves me. I know he does. But he's also a blind fool. Shoving him away, I clear the angry hurt in my throat. "I'm rich, and I own part of his company."

His shoulders ease. "No, not Rune."

"Zane?" I hiss, disbelief like a sour truth on my tongue. I sink back to my chair. "Fuck."

Clyde doesn't answer. He doesn't have to. Instead, he crouches and cleans up my mess, gathering the broken plate and stacking it on the table next to his perfect pancakes without a word.

"Let me guess," I say. "Rune promised Zane he could have my money if he handed over the shares of Rune's company I inherited from my parents."

Still nothing.

"Clyde," I snap. His dark eyes meet mine, so full of sorrow, my anger weakens even more. "I deserve to know what Zane expects as payment for marrying the disgraced Julian girl."

"You deserve more than all of this, Cora," Clyde says.

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Chapter 12

Delilah

HEAT TRAVELS UP MY spine.

An ache blooms low in my belly.

Pain pricks on my lip, his sharp teeth cutting into the soft flesh.

"You're ours."

My thighs bracket his hips, knees digging into the fabric of the couch beneath him. The heat of his skin against mine makes me whimper. His breath fans over my face. Suede and male and smokey sweetness. I feel him moving into me, warm fingers gripping my ass, guiding me up and down, hips jutting upwards to meet me. He drives in slow at first then faster, thrusting deeper. I rock my hips to match the pace he's set, moaning as he hits in deep.

There's a flash of a scar over his eye, but it fades and it's just black lashes around deep black pools of ink reflecting the light in the room.

Fangs for teeth, the canines elongated and curved like they hold venom.

Pale blue eyes rake over me with such want my walls clench around him.

Two deep lines over plush lips, but then I notice the stitching around the square, masculine jaw. Like someone sewed his flesh back together.

"Does it hurt?" I ask him as he slips deeply into me.

"It did at first. But I got used to the pain," he whispers. "I like it now. It reminds me of you."

Long fingers covered in tattoos claw at the seams around his jaw. The skin pops, blood oozing down the thick column of his neck.

“No,” I gasp. “You’ll hurt yourself.”

“Don’t worry, Kitten. I don’t need this face.” His fingers dig into my cheeks as he fucks me deeper. Harder. “I’ll just take yours. It’s mine after all.”

I sit up gasping, and my eyes land on him. A scream peels out of me but fades quickly.

He lounges in the chair, legs splayed confidently, fingers drumming a silent rhythm on his thigh, saturating the room with his dominant air. Bright sunlight casts long shadows across him, the thin squares of the window panes creating geometric patterns of light and shadow over his black shirt and mask.

He shifts slightly in his seat, letting me know he’s been there a while. “Nightmares again?”

I suck in a breath, blinking, the last dregs of the dream fading.

His black eyes fall from my face to my body. I glance down. My nightgown rode up in my sleep, sticking to my belly, showing my white underwear and where my hand slipped between my thighs as I slept.

“Or dreaming of us?”

I grit my teeth, sliding my hand out of my underwear, looking around the room. It’s hot as hell in here and I notice the slight pop of the furnace and the fire blazing in the hearth. How did they light it while I slept? And how long was I asleep?

Viper left me in his room last night and I slinked back to my room, and hid in my bed, crying myself to sleep. This is the first time I’ve seen Reaper since he left me tied to his bed. My cheeks heat at the idea that Viper may have told them how I begged to be fucked.

Tossing the thought aside, I pull my nightgown down over my sticky thighs, kicking away the rest of the blankets, then place a foot on the cool floor.

“It’s hot in here,” I say, noticing by the slant of the sun, it’s late afternoon, and I slept most of the day away.

“First she’s too cold. Now she’s too hot,” Reaper says. “Make up your mind, Kitten.”

I glare at him, walking to the furnace and find it turned all the way up. I lower the setting, then face him, my belly fluttering. It doesn’t matter

his uniform is plain black, it's how he wears it that makes it so unbelievably sexy, and I can't help but soak in the sight of him. Clothes seem to embrace him, each fabric fiber clinging possessively to his chiseled muscles, emphasizing every bulge and curve. I want to sink my teeth into him. Hurt him a little as payback for this constant want that lives inside me now.

But I think I already hurt him.

There's a part of me that wants to apologize for my comment yesterday, but then I spot the gun propped on his knee under his large hand, and all thoughts fade. It doesn't go unnoticed that he's wearing his gloves. Besides a knife strapped to Viper and Breaker's belts, none of the men have carried any weapons. It makes me realize now how strategic they've been. Reaper has never once worn a single weapon, and I can't recall Striker wearing any either, making me think they never wanted us to feel like they were a real danger.

Then again their sheer size and the force emanating from them means they don't need any weapons. They are one.

I gesture to the pistol. "Didn't realize I pissed you off to the point of murdering me."

"That would be too easy, Kitten." That fucking smirk makes his mouth move under his mask. "And a waste," he adds, eyes moving all over me. "I need you to complete this mission, so killing you will do me no good."

I shoot him a sardonic smile. "Nice to know I'm useful for something other than fucking when the mood strikes."

He stands upright, gun still in hand, but down at his side as he stalks forward, each step precise and rigid. I back up but hit the cool metal railing of the footboard. Reaper stops inches from me, invading all my senses with smoke and cedar and power, making the dream resurface. He leans in, angling his head to the side to keep my gaze as he rests his hands on the railing on either side of me, effectively trapping me in place.

Onyx eyes drag from my lips, down my neck and slip with such heat over my collar bone to the thin straps of my nightgown it feels like he's dragging warm fingers over my flesh. A hot breath caresses my ear. "If all I wanted you for was a rough fuck, then you'd still be tied to my bed, legs spread eagle, cunt on display and ready for me right now."

The way my body reacts makes me hate him as much as my body craves him.

A grating sound rumbles from his chest, sounding a lot like irritation. “I didn’t risk my life and that of my brother’s for a fuck toy.”

“Just a bonus,” I say, because I apparently have no control over myself when it comes to this man.

Reaper leans back some. The gun *clinks* against the metal, the sound making my heart flutter oddly. It would probably do me good to remember who he is. He’s warned me over and over he’s not a nice man.

But he’s nothing like Rune.

“Penny for your thoughts, my pretty Kitten.”

I blink, realizing I’ve just been staring down at his hand with the gun balanced on the railing. I look up at his masked face and irritation rolls through me. Not once in my life did I ever think I’d be able to identify a man by the feel of his dick, but not his face.

“Are you going to lose the mask?” I ask, voice brittle.

The mask doesn’t bother me so much, as does the reason behind it.

He doesn’t trust me.

Not like Striker and now Breaker.

And I need to remember not to place all my trust in him.

Reaper steps away, and it feels like I can breathe again. “Do guns scare you?”

Of course he’s going to ignore my question. That’s what he does.

I eye him, then point to the gun in his hand. “Should I be scared of that gun?”

“Are you scared of the man holding it?”

I *knew* I hurt him. The realization gives me a sick sort of gratification knowing that I’ve finally found a way to get under his skin. He’s been so cold, giving me just fragments of himself, and now I hold some power over him.

I’ve taken long enough to respond that he inhales, chest rising, and looks down at his hand briefly, then back up at me.

“Wary,” I say finally. “I’m not scared of you, but of what you’re capable of doing.”

His body grows tense, eyes flashing with something akin to disappointment. I’ve studied him enough that I can tell from his body language he doesn’t like that answer any more than if I told him I was terrified of him.

Reaper steps back and holds the weapon up. It looks like a standard gun you see in movies. All black metal, but it looks small in his hands. “Have you ever fired a gun?”

I shake my head slowly, my heart skipping at just the thought of holding a gun. “No.”

“Have you ever wanted to?”

I flash on the day they took us. When Clyde reached for his gun, and I debated grabbing it and shooting them. But I didn’t know how, and I remember the helpless fury that ate at my belly, knowing how defenseless I was.

“Yes,” I say, and I swear he smirks, like he knows exactly what I’m thinking. He should. Reaper is, after all, the reason I was both helpless and scared.

“Good. Today you will learn.”

“Excuse me?”

Reaper turns and stalks to the door.

“What does that mean?” I ask, rushing after him.

“Exactly what it sounds like.” He doesn’t answer my string of questions as he continues to the door. Like, why do I need to learn to fire a gun? Who does he plan on having me shoot? He stops walking, turning to face me, and I nearly crash into him.

Hooking a finger under my chin, he tilts my head back to look at him, sending my stupid heart fluttering. “Do you want our Baby Girl home?”

My breath hitches. Home. Ours. Tears spring to my eyes. I bite my lip and nod.

Reaper’s thumb skates over my bottom lip before his hand drops. “Get dressed and meet me downstairs in fifteen.” He points to a stack of black and gray clothing sitting on the vanity. “Don’t be late or you’ll pay the consequences.”

That threat does weird things to the greedy place between my thighs. When he shuts the door, I rush to the stack of clothes and get dressed, barely paying attention to the fact I now have leggings, a sports bra, and a hoodie.

Our Baby Girl.

Yes. Ours. I want our Cora back.

Home.

***

It’s too cold to be outside, but these men don’t seem to mind. The thick black leggings left for me do nothing to cut the cold blowing in from the north, nor does the grey hoodie, even when I bury my hands in the front pocket.

I pull the front door closed, making sure to latch it. My boots thud almost as loud as my heart as I descend the stairs and stop in the drive where Reaper and Striker stand, both holding duffel bags and grins. At least, Striker has a grin, I’m sure Reaper smirks but he’s wearing his stupid mask so I can’t tell.

That grin curls into a mischievous smirk. “Nice hoodie,” Striker says gesturing to me.

My gaze drops to the large block lettering on the front of my shirt spelling out the word TEAMPLAYER. I was in such a hurry to get dressed and lace my boots, I barely paid attention to my clothing. I look up to the men before me, catching Striker nudging Reaper in the side. Reaper rocks back on his heels, dropping his chin like he’s hiding a smirk.

Not like he has to. I can’t see his fucking face anyways.

“Real mature,” I say.

Striker’s grin widens, making my belly flip. He’s so beautiful. Gorgeous golden eyes and tanned flesh that begs to be licked. All white teeth and full lips. Lips I wish were on mine, my body, between my legs. I let out a huff of annoyance at how quickly my mind deteriorates around these men.

Men. Except two… one is missing.

“Where’s Viper?” I ask.

Reaper shrugs in this wholly arrogant, completely uncaring way that makes me want to scream. With the way he acted upstairs, I had thought we’d moved past this. Past the uncaring demeanor. That we’d moved into something new the other night and instead of this push and pull we constantly do, we were going to embrace this. But it’s as if every time he gives me fragment of his gentleness, he has to cut me with his sharpness, reminding me that while he says I’m his, he’s not mine.

The thought slices through me, making my shoulders droop. My emotions feel shy, unsafe, leaving me unable to find solid ground long

enough to sort through it all. Cora's safety sits front and center, but it's all jumbled with this unquiet feeling coiling up in me. What I need is reassurance not just that we're getting Cora back, but that when I let them claim me, claim us, I didn't make a mistake.

That they do want me. They aren't lying. But none of them are giving me that. And any time I'm alone with them, things tend to get out of hand, myself most of all. Cora seemed to redirect some of their attentions and made me feel…

Less focused on.

My eyes snap to them, all my attention returning to Reaper and Striker just a few feet away. This is the first time I've realized I'm alone with them.

Really, truly alone.

And I'm not sure how I'm supposed to manage them.

You managed them all just fine a few days ago.

I pinch the bridge of my nose, already feeling a headache blooming.

"I think she's still mad at us," Striker says.

"Do you blame me?" I ask, stuffing my hand back in the pocket of my hoodie. "You sent my best-friend back to marry Zane-fucking-Devin."

Reaper slowly angles his head toward Striker.

"Breaker told her," Striker says.

"Why?" I ask, Reaper. "Zane is a drunken sleaze."

"You know why," Reaper says. "Everything would have been ruined."

"Oh, yes. Your plan," I say, sarcasm dripping from every word. "You sent her back so not to foil your precious plans."

"Should we let Rune continue?" Reaper asks, stepping closer like he does when I've pissed him off. Like his proximity will intimidate me. Stupid man. He should have learned by now. I know he won't hurt me.

I take a step forward too. "You made her a promise."

"We will," they both say at once, like they are one voice.

"And we promised you," Striker adds.

I don't give a fuck about the promises they made me. But I do care about what Cora is feeling right now. Alone. Rejected. Terrified of Rune hurting her again. And she doesn't even know the worst part yet. She may know surface level what Rune is capable of, but she never saw the pictures in those files.

“But it will take time,” Striker says.

My finger’s curl into a fist in my pocket. “She doesn’t have time,” I hiss, pinning my glare on Reaper. “We need to act now.”

“*When* we take Cora back, we’ll start a war,“ Reaper says. “These deals are unbreakable unless they’re replaced with something better.”

Anger heats my face, frustration churning my stomach because he’s right, and I know it. We can’t just storm Rune’s house and snatch her up. Zane will get involved along with his alliances. We have to find a way to break this deal and settle things peacefully so the men can still complete their mission.

“And since Rune will never let Zane get his hands on you—“ Reaper steps even closer— “Since I will never let anyone else get their hands on you, we better be prepared to spill blood. And lots of it if things go south. But first I need you trained.”

And we better be prepared to win, Runes’ words fill my head. He sounds so much like my father right now that maybe I would be smart to be a bit more scared of him. Terrified even.

I glance at Striker, and his handsome face is so hard, that I know they mean it. They’ll get her. They promised us both and they are prepared to kill to do it.

Remember we killed to make you ours. My heart flips, remembering Reaper’s words.

Yet. I can’t go back yet. And I need to be prepared for my role in this war, whatever that is. Apparently that includes learning to fire a weapon.

I take a breath. “What do I have to do?”

Reaper relaxes, the churning in his eyes calming.

“Follow us,” Striker says adjusting his duffle on his shoulder and walking away. Reaper follows and I don’t have much choice but to do the same.

We walk along the long dirt road, past the carriage house, and weave around to the south end of the property where the forest turns slightly swampy, giving way to the marsh. I watch as the two men remove a long, thin rifle from one of the bags then unfold a target. Striker walks toward the tree line and attaches the large target to a thick trunk, then returns a moment later, taking the rifle from Reaper and motioning me forward.

“We’ll start you off with a .22 long rifle,” he says. “It has less kick.”

My heart lurches into my throat. “I’ve never held a gun before, much less one that big.”

“Sure, you have,” Striker says, that playful grin returning. “I’ve seen you handle Breaker just fine.”

My face heats, and I avoid eye contact as Striker walks toward me, rifle outstretched.

“Is it loaded?” I ask when he’s right in front of me.

Reaper chuckles as Striker says, “You think we’re going to hand a loaded gun to an accountant before we show her how to use it?”

I shake my head, feeling out of my element, both with the idea of holding a weapon and with this new dynamic we’ve established. Push, pull. Flirty, serious. Sexy, dangerous.

Before he lets me hold the rifle, Striker tells me about each part, then demonstrates the proper way of holding it, how to place my finger next to the trigger instead of on it.

“Here,” he says. “You try.”

With my nerves frayed, that day flickering in the back of my mind, I take the weapon and inspect it, shoving down my unease.

This is for Cora. I will get her back.

I mimic what Striker showed me, and once he seems satisfied that I can hold it properly, he takes it back, and loads it, placing earmuffs over his ears. Reaper hands me a pair as Striker lifts the firearm, aiming at the target. Adjusting the earmuffs, I watch Striker’s muscles tense and all that unease I felt, melts. Heart racing for a different reason, I focus on his body, how he widens his stance slightly, the rifle tucked neatly and tightly against his shoulder, almost like it’s an extension of him. There’s something so primal about the sight of Striker holding the rifle, so innately sexual that I forget I’m nervous as I devour the sight of his muscular arms, tight ass, his strong back and large hands.

Next to me, Reaper clears his throat. I blink, glancing his way. He crosses his arms and lifts his chin—a silent reminder to pay attention to the lesson and not Striker’s ass.

Striker looks over at me briefly, and winks before repositioning himself, aiming at the target.

I take a deep breath, shifting my focus.

“Ready?” Reaper asks.

Avoiding looking his way, I give a subtle nod.

I know the sound's coming. I'm familiar with the explosive crack of a bullet leaving the chamber. I heard it the day they took me. How it reverberates in the air. Creates a hollowness in the ears. I remember watching Manuel fall after a bullet hit the center of his forehead and still, that's not what sends fear snaking through my limbs, numbing my fingers.

What people don't know is that you don't hear the sound of a bullet when it's shot from a distance by a professional killer. All you hear is the slight whisper of it piercing flesh, the slick sound of metal imbedding itself into muscle and hitting bone.

Then, absolute silence. Like time freezes, everything but where the bullet lands ceasing to exist except for that pinprick of red. And how it grows.

A single image slaps me.

Her face frozen in a smile.

The sparking life in her eyes one second there. Vibrant.

The next, gone.

Then blood was spraying out of the side of her head onto my lavender dress.

"Ready to try?"

I blink. Sucking in a breath to find Striker holding out the gun to me. I feel Reaper's penetrating gaze moving over my face and I glance his way.

He doesn't move.

I reach for the gun. He stalks forward, arm outstretched as if to grab the rifle. "You don't have to."

My hand drops as our eyes collide. "If I want Cora, I have to."

His shoulders bunch but he nods, glancing at Striker as he motions for me to continue. Striker places the gun in my hands, holding me and the weapon until I'm aiming, and he's positioned my hands where he wants them.

"Don't press," Striker says backing away some to give me space, and I'm too acutely aware of his proximity. Of how fast my heart is racing, knowing I'm holding a deadly weapon in my hands. Knowing I have another one at my back and one more beside me.

My hands shake, my fingers slick with sweat as I aim for the target.

"Pull back gently," Striker says. "Don't smash it down. You pull, like you're coaxing it to fire rather than smashing the bullet out of the barrel."

A cold blast of wind skates across my face, blowing tendrils of hair over my eyes. Reaper steps to me, and leans forward, tucking the flyaway behind my ear and my entire body shoots through with heat, fireworks exploding over the skin where he touched. It doesn't matter that he's wearing his gloves. My body remembers his heat and wants it again.

"Ready?" Striker asks quietly from my other side. "It doesn't have much of a kick, but there's a small one so don't be surprised."

I nod again, trying to put all my focus on not accidentally firing before I'm ready and not the two men flanking me. The last part feels harder than the first and I shove back the thought that I should feel such desire for them even now.

I shake my head, feeling their eyes on me. Tilting my ankle to feel the little knife in my boot. I lick my lips.

I can fight.

I can and will get Cora and I can and will stop Rune. But I have to do this before I can go back.

I suck in a breath and pull.

Dirt explodes at the tree line at least a foot away from the target. My heart does next, adrenaline rushing through my veins like mercury.

"Good girl," Striker says. "Again."

I pull back, shooting the tree next to the target, and grin.

"Better," Striker says. "Again."

I adjust my aim slightly and shoot again, feeling that silvery excitement coursing through me faster. The bottom corner of the target ripples.

"Good," Reaper says, my grin growing wider as Striker taps my arm, silently telling me to shift the rifle to the left.

I do and when I pull the trigger, the target ripples outward from the center.

I gasp, lowering the gun so fast that Striker snags it from my grasp and pulls it away. "Did I hit the black part?"

Reaper stalks forward to inspect the target while my eyes inspect him.

Striker's hand lands on my lower back and he pulls me close. "That was good," he whispers, warm breath fanning my ear.

My hands land on his chest, fingers curling to feel the solid muscle beneath.

“There he is,” Reaper says from behind me. I turn to see him gesturing toward the cliffs. Slipping from Striker’s embrace, I see Viper walking up, strong legs eating up the distance between us. Just the sight of him sends heat between my legs.

God, I’m so fucked.

When he’s within shouting distance, Viper calls, “Hey, have you guys seen Breaker?”

Striker meets my eyes. My heart leaps, skips, *sings*, and I bite my lip to hide my smile.

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Chapter 13

Cora

BEFORE I WAS KIDNAPPED and taken to a secluded run-down mansion by four hot masked men who threatened to fuck me constantly, then claimed me in some weird primal way, then two of them actually did fuck me, I enjoyed work.

I loved waking up, preparing myself for the day, picking out sharply tailored suits and stiletto heels, slipping them on like armor readying myself for battle. Because that's what the days often felt like. Being a head accountant for a large corporation isn't for the faint of heart. It's not just numbers and keeping track of expenditures, it's looking into deals and finding loopholes. It's making sure we're the one's fucking someone over, rather than getting fucked.

And then there was the ledgers. Hiding millions. Laundering hundreds of thousands through mergers and bullshit purchases. Delly and I were good at it. Delly was always able to spot a flaw in a deal and rework the numbers. I was good at hiding money.

We grew Rune's fortune. We hid his activities, even though we had no idea what we were hiding. We made this job look easy, the two of us.

Today I'm dreading it. Today I feel like a pawn, just a piece to be moved around on the board. Even though I'm wearing my armor, I don't feel ready. I miss my pretty floral dresses and my combat boots. I miss my warm sweaters and thick socks.

I miss them.

I don’t want to be here, tucked between Clyde and the side door, headed for the office to resume my job, return to my role as Rune’s accountant. Until I’m Zane’s wife that is. Maybe he won’t care if I have a job, or if Rune uses me. It’s not like Zane’s marrying me because he likes me. He’s doing it for money, greed, and to be connected to Rune even more.

It’s all just a cruel reminder that after wanting away from Rune for so long, I’m finally getting my wish. Except now instead of freedom, I’m getting Zane, and his darkness is just as bad.

When we pull up in front of the office complex, my heart hammers. Last time I was in this building, I was watching Rune’s soldiers being shot and was forced away from the only life I’ve ever known and thrust into a dream.

I feel like I’m waking up now, but instead of reality being a comfort, it’s a nightmare. Like layers of gauze are being stripped away as the hours pass and everything I went through, the confusion, the fear, the lust, and the acceptance, were just some dream and I never left here. Like my body stayed and my mind wandered to a place that I was wanted and desired and dare I say, liked.

I lean back into the leather seat as Conner hops out and rushes around to open my door. My heel clacks on the concrete sidewalk as I step out. Noise hits me like a train. Cars honking, people talking. The sound of a motor revving, like a race car or motorcycle, from nearby, makes me wince.

Taking a deep breath, inhaling the warm, exhaust scented air, I smooth my skirt down, then adjust my sunglasses as I look up at the tall building, trying to calm my breathing.

People mill about, talking on phones and texting. Cars honk and an engine roars again. I glance over and spot a black motorcycle—one of those crotch rocket things— parked a few cars down at the curb with a rider dressed all in black, his shiny visor on the helmet reflecting the bright morning sun. A black leather boot like the ones our men wear rest on the curb. Thick black gloves grip the handlebars. Clyde grasps my hand and tugs me forward, pulling my attention back to him.

“Cora!”

My heart slams into my chest and oil pools in my gut. I turn just in time to see Zane headed in my direction, arms outstretched like he’s going to—

I wince as his arms wrap around me and I'm pressed to his sleazy chest. He's nowhere near as tall as the boys, nowhere near as built and it feels like being coiled up in the slithering body of a serpent, its cold body squeezing me too tightly. His cologne invades my nostrils, making my stomach roil. Zane smells like musk, but not underline with woodsy lust, he's dank and venomous. Being hugged by this creep is a betrayal not only to my senses but to Delly and to the men.

And I'm expected to marry him. Part my legs for him. Birth his babies.

I have got to figure out a way out of this.

"Thank goodness you're okay," Zane says stepping back, holding me by the shoulders to run his eyes over my body.

I plaster a smile on my face. "I wasn't aware that my well-being was a concern for you." Behind me, I'm aware of Clyde slipping away to wait by the door. He can't stand Zane, but he's leaving me to fend for myself like the coward he is. "Or that you had any concern for anything or anyone other than yourself."

That slithering smile curls into something dark as he drops his hands from my shoulders. My stomach lurches. I need to remember who he is.

Rune didn't pick him to be his second because he's decent. He picked him because he's viscous. Cunning. And can mold himself to be anything to get himself ahead.

And mold he did.

Zane knows how to play the game and the slimeball will turn on someone on a dime. I've witnessed first-hand just how good he is at hiding what he's really like under his Ken doll appearance.

He shakes his head, that smirk turning from slimy to knowing. "So much like your mother."

My teeth gnash together to keep my mouth closed, but the words still slip out. "Funny. I wasn't aware you knew my mother."

His jaw tics. "In passing. You can't work for Rune as long as I have and not have met the infamous Caroline Julian."

"Infamous?" I ask sweetly, adjusting my messenger bag draped over my shoulder. "In what way?"

His gaze rakes down my body, making me wish I had chosen a different outfit. With how his hazel eyes drink me in, I'm regretting my

heels and skirt. I wish I'd opted for pants so he couldn't see the shape of my legs, the slenderness of my ankles.

Licking my lips, I step away, not sure how to deal with his open surveying of my body. Zane's always been obsessed with Delly, rarely looking my way. Having his full attention is extremely uncomfortable, making me feel like a bug under a microscope. No wonder Delly was constantly trying to avoid him. But I guess now that Zane's been told I'll be his wife, he thinks he can behave in whatever manner he likes.

We'll see. If I can handle Rune, I can deal with Zane and his serial killer vibes. Asshole probably killed kittens as a boy or peeped inside girls windows.

Or had a fetish for sniffing older women's underwear.

His eyes slip back up to mine, leaving my body tingling with unease, that knowing grin still playing on his lips. "In what way does any woman become infamous, Cora?"

This time I don't bother attempting to stop my mouth from opening. "Fraud, extortion." I lean in to whisper, "Murder."

His eyes light up. Not what I was expecting.

"This is going to be fun," he says.

I make a conscious effort to look unfazed, as my insides scream. No one besides Rune, knows that I know my mother had his wife killed. And Rune knows I know because he flat out told me the day he took me in and set me down in what would be my bedroom.

I can still smell his cologne as he hugged me close and told me that I was traitor blood. That I was lucky he was kind and compassionate, and the only reason he didn't kill me was because Delilah loved me, and her heart was broken enough.

He made sure I knew my place, and that my life was only valuable as long as his daughter loved me. I was well aware of how little I was worth before Rune took me in. And was made aware of how lower I'd just fell. But to have him say it, made me want to cry not just myself, but for Delly. Maybe that's why I always felt the need to protect her.

She didn't know her father was bad.

But I did. And I knew at ten just how to detect vile men, and the one before me is just as bad as Rune because he's a traitor like my mother.

"Have a good day, Zane." I step around him, eyes locked on the front of the building. A firm grip on my bicep stops me mid-stride, and I glare

over my shoulder at Zane who's apparently lost his mind in the last three weeks.

His hand drops to his side, but I note how his fingers flex, like Rune does right before he lashes out. "Has Rune filled you in on the details?" Zane asks.

I catch the hint of a smile and my stomach roils. "Same old shit, different day, right? We make deals, we hide evil, and we make even more money. Just another day in paradise," I snark, "Except I get the disadvantage of having to see your dick when the ink's dry."

Zanes eyes narrow, slightly irritated by my insult, my presence and the fact we're talking, which fits him better than the fake concern. I'm not stupid enough to think he gave a shit if I was okay. And it's no wonder he's irritated. I was returned, and I'm not Delly. I'm set to be his wife. Not Delly.

He sighs. "A deal's a deal so we have to move forward. Besides, Cora it won't be…"

I nod absently, only half listening—half caring— that he's talking to me. "Yeah. I guess being kidnapped, doesn't give me a pass. Duties and all."

When I move toward the door again, a passerby slams into me. On instinct, I shove him back as he mumbles an apology, and my eyes land on the biker. My step falters. There's something about him…

"Look at me when I speak to you."

My eyes snap over Zane. He's beside me, features contorted messily, like his mask slipped and all that ugliness living in him leaks through.

I recoil at his expression and his tone. "Excuse me?

"I said, look at me when I speak to you." The harsh grip on my chin, makes me wince, bitter fear flooding my mouth. The possessive, angry flare in his eyes makes me jerk away, but his grip tightens, fingers digging harshly into my skin. My heart skips in all the wrong ways, the angry grip and the violent tone reminding me so much of Rune that I freeze in place, blinking stupidly as Zane leans in and says, "I don't like repeating myself. When I give you an order—"

An engine revving drowns out the rest of his words and unfreezes me. I jerk back, Zane's fingers slipping away, the same time Conner drives away and the black motorcycle skids to a stop at the curb.

Zane turns around long enough to glance at the bike, and grips my arm, pulling me forward. I snatch my arm back, freeing myself from his hold as I watch the rider swing his long leg over the bike and stride, with slow, deliberate steps toward us.

Like he can sense the dark presence storming up behind him, Zane turns back around and before he even has a chance, the rider grabs him by his face and tugs him forward, looming over him menacingly. Black gloved fingers dig harshly into Zane's cheeks the same way Zane was holding me, but hard enough that his lips part.

Spittle flies from Zane's mouth, his eyes burning red as he grunts and tries to talk, but the rider only pinches his cheeks tighter.

"Back off!" Clyde screams and suddenly things are moving. People gasp, a woman scurries into the front of the building.

Someone screams.

Clyde steps up next to me, arm outstretched, gun in one hand pointed directly at the rider's head.

"I said back off, buddy," Clyde growls. "Unless you want your father to struggle to identify your body after I release this entire clip into your helmet, I suggest you let him go."

With a brutal shove, the rider pushes Zane away, taking a step back. His covered face turns to me, and he nods, before he turns his back to us, and stalks away. The engine is deafening as the bike roars to life, and he rides away.

My cackle breaks through the air, unfreezing everyone.

"What the fuck was that?" Zane screams, sobering me quickly. "Get some fucking decent security Harlow! I want that mother fucker tracked down."

Clyde nods, waving away onlookers and sliding his gun in its holster at his back. "I'll get the security footage and see if we can get a read on the plates."

Zane doesn't answer, just pops his neck and rubs his jaw, stalking toward the entrance. "I want him found Harlow," he throws over his shoulder. "And I want a new security team."

Clyde shakes his head, glancing down the street before taking my hand. "I swear, girl, you attract trouble everywhere you go."

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Chapter 19

Breaker

I'M NOT A DECENT man. I'm not someone my mother would be proud to have given her life for. I've killed. Maimed. Hurt people far beyond the scope of what the human mind can imagine.

Because that's what I was told I was. Destruction. And that's all I was good for.

That's all I want to do right now.

The engine roars. My blood rushes in my ears. I lean forward, lowering myself closer to the handlebars, moving with the bike as I speed through traffic weaving in between cars, ignoring traffic lights. The scream of brakes and angry shouts barely register through the rage boiling in my head.

Fucking Zane Devin.

The bastard is lucky he still has his hands.

The tires squeal as I make a sharp turn, and skid to a stop in front of the metal gate. Leaning over, I tap the code into the control pad. The chain link rattles as the gate opens and I ease the bike through into the empty parking lot. The building looms before me, dingy metal and concrete blocks cracked with age cast in a yellow glow of sunlight. Bright graffiti mars the outside, even as high as the second floor.

I ride up to the giant bay doors, heart thundering so hard it's setting my teeth set on edge. Gripping the handles, I lower my head, trying to focus on anything other than Cora's face as that sack of shit grabbed her.

That familiar urge to ruin grates inside my chest. Destroy Zanes fucking face. The restraint it took to not slam him down to the concrete and kick the shit out of him should earn me a fucking medal.

Self-control is a sign of true power. Father used to tell us that. You control your emotions. The second you allow another control over how you feel, they own you.

Funny coming from a man who was constantly manipulating how we felt and behaved every single day.

Once I feel calmer, I climb off the bike and remove my phone, opening the app to unlock the bay doors. The large, metal bay slides upwards, the vibrant graffiti of a smiling skull disappearing from view. There are a few more words and images added to the building since the last time I was here. I'll have to check the cameras to find out where these kids are slipping through the chain link fence around the property.

A hollow drip of water echoes through the room as I wheel my bike inside. The bay door buzzes and rattles, slamming into place with a metal thwack as it hits the concrete floor.

After I kick the stand in place, I slip off my helmet and breathe in deeply, muscles still taunt, body amped and coiled too tightly. It's only been three weeks since we've been here and already the musty smell Viper worked so hard to remove is settling back in. I hit the buttons lining the wall and the large, open space floods with a pale sodium light.

We purchased the old factory years ago because of its location. It was easy to go unnoticed in this area. The only people who paid attention to us were the homeless wandering around and the drug dealers that dared to enter this part of town.

Everyone knows who runs this neighborhood and few want to risk that fat, track-suit bastards' wrath.

My boots thud against the rough concrete floor, that damn insistent dripping water, drilling into my head. I shrug out of my jacket and toss it on the worn couch in the center of the space and continue to the metal stairs leading to the second floor.

When Viper said we should use the place as a hub, it seemed like a good idea. It was close enough to town that we could keep an eye on the girls, and we didn't have to worry about renting a place while we gathered intel.

Little did we know this run down, damp, and dilapidated building would become our home for such a long time. I stop on the second-floor landing and glance around, checking to make sure all is how we left it. The entire floor wraps around the open factory floor like an overlook, the outer walls lined with offices we converted to rooms. Strike and Reaper each took a room towards the front while Viper and I snagged the other two at the back.

My body aches, my head hurts. I need to sleep after riding all night to get here. I head toward my room, my bed calling, but stop, and take the stairs to the third floor, instead. I spill out onto a massive open loft where we store all our equipment.

What I need is a distraction.

And a plan.

When I left, vowing to our Tiny Thing that I'd keep Cora safe, I didn't have any plan. It was a reaction, my specialty. I just knew there was no way I could live with myself, knowing she was here, alone, scared, and in the hands of the people we're trying to take down.

Now I'm here and thank fuck I am. Seeing Zane's hands on her nearly sent me into a blackout rage. What will he do if she's alone with him? Clyde Harlow provides a small amount of safety, the man is insane, and no doubt would shoot Zane's head off, but what happens when he's not around?

And what happens if we can't organize ourselves fast enough and Cora ends up marrying that prick?

Just the thought of him touching her heats my blood, rage so blinding roiling in me, I grip the railing to steady myself. How dare he think he can place a ring on her finger, binding her to him as if she belongs to him and not us.

I'll kill him.

Fucking gouge his eyes out.

Sucking in a deep breath, I shove the brutal images away, my rage easing some as I center my thoughts. I tap the metal railing, then move forward, locking my gaze on the far wall.

I need a plan.

One that I can enact on my own.

God what was I thinking? Taking off alone? I've never been away from them. Since I stepped foot in that school, Striker, Viper and I have

never been apart for more than a few days. Reaper only that week when he went out in the wilderness.

Even when we were out there, we stuck together. We always have. At any cost, we've kept each other safe.

Now she needs us and I'm the only one here with no clue what I'm supposed to do next.

I flop down in one of the metal chairs around the large wooden table that holds my computers, and other various equipment. If I'm going to be of any use, I need to set up a way to keep an eye on her. I can't be with her twenty-four-seven, but I can be her shadow.

Rune made her stay at his house last night, and I have a feeling he'll continue to make her stay with him until she's in Zane's hands.

That means no cameras, no bugs on the inside, and I have no way of getting into his house. That was part of the problem we faced watching them before. Rune's mansion is a fortress, and he checks for devices constantly.

How I'm going to keep her safe while she's holed up in his home, I have no clue. Keeping surveillance was a hell of a lot easier when there were four of us taking shifts.

I lean back in the chair, spreading my legs out as I pull my phone from my pocket. I bring up the encrypted messaging app we use to communicate and pull up his code name. I type out my message and hit send.

I place my phone on the table, and stare out at various tech devices, trying to figure out how the fuck I'm going to keep her from harm until Delilah is ready and we can put an end to Rune.

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Chapter 15

Breaker

15 years ago, June, Age 13

THE LAST TIME FALLON allowed us to go to the village was in the spring before we began training. We didn't know it was the last time he'd let us travel there, so we didn't take advantage of the trip.

Of course, Fallon doesn't know Cook loads a few of us up every week to keep him company on the drive to town for perishables. So far Fallon either hasn't guessed at these secret outings or he doesn't mind.

I'm going to guess the latter because Fallon knows everything that happens in the school.

"I can't wait to get my hands on those little cakes the girl in the bakery makes," Viper says from next to me. He's sitting up against the cab, near the window talking with Cook on and off as we make the drive. I'm next to him, both our legs spread out. Every time the truck lurches, I slide into him, our hips smashing together, and our boots collide. He doesn't

seem to mind so I didn't scoot away the last time I slid his way. Striker's at our feet, his back to the wheel well, face turned up to the warm sun. None of us are wearing our uniforms, and I can't help but stare at the black t-shirt that hugs Striker's chest.

So much so that I turn my attention back to Viper but that just makes me think about how his white t-shirt and tight gray pants look like the outfit Marlon Brando wore in the movie Cook likes so much. Something about a streetcar. He even sort of looks like him with the way his lips pout.

Viper's been working out hard and his body shows it. Striker too, but he's got nothing on the large muscles of Viper's biceps.

I wonder if I'm going to ever grow as tall and large as him. This past Spring I grew three inches, but I'm still shorter than Striker. Almost as tall as Vipe, but I have a few inches before I get anywhere near as tall as Reaper. All my training this past year has given me some muscles, but I'm still scrawny.

I hate that word. Hunter says I'm a scrawny kid and it eats at me how he smiles when he says it. Like he's trying to provoke me into hitting him.

Fallon says my temper is going to be the end of me, but he should know I keep myself in check. He's the one who let it free. If I unleash what really lives inside me, I don't think my brothers would look at me the same. And Hunter would think twice about provoking me.

"Are you going to go see your favorite girl?" Striker says. That knowing smirk on his face makes my fingers itch to punch it off his face.

"You mean the girl with the black hair?" Viper asks. "The one he's always drooling over and dances around like a love sick puppy—ow shit!"

I scowl at him, pulling my fist back as he rubs his bicep where my fist landed. "I don't dance around her."

"Notice he's not denying he drools over her," Striker says, yanking his legs up to his chest to avoid my boot. "And, she's not even that pretty. I don't get why you like her so much."

"No one's as pretty as Breaker," Viper says with a laugh. I slap his hand away as he tries to squeeze my cheeks. "No girl could ever match this pretty face."

"She is too," I snap, my face heating even more as I glare at him. I hate it when he teases me about being so pretty. Fallon says boys aren't supposed to be pretty, yet my brothers tell me constantly I have the prettiest

face they've ever seen. "She has beautiful obsidian hair, eyes like the midnight sky, and skin so soft it's like satin."

Cook's cackle rings out from the cab. "Holy shit. Do you hear this kid? Like a goddamn poet."

My chest tightens, a knot forming right in the center. Anger makes my face burn hotter and the slick, gross feeling I get whenever Striker calls me a kid in front of Viper, slips and twists in my gut.

"Boy thinks, he's in love," Cook shouts. The truck jolts as we hit a pothole, and the bed creaks loudly, jumbling his next few words. I all hear is,"—since he spends the entire time in that back room with her."

Cook's an asshole, I remind myself. He's probably just jealous she gives me attention and won't even look his way. He's not handsome, not like Reaper, and certainly not like Viper and Striker. He's plain, American I think, his accent is like those old black and white movies he loves. Even though he's still young, there are wrinkles around his eyes and mouth. And he has an ugly nose. It looks like it's been broken one too many times so it's a little smashed to his face.

Viper told me once his real name was George, but Fallon told George and the other staff at the school they were to go by their titles not their names. That we didn't need to know their names to eat the food they cook or learn the lessons from Teacher. When I asked Viper how he knew all this he grew quiet then just said Cook told him once when he was helping him clean the kitchen as punishment for eating an extra slice of bread.

"I'm teaching her French," I yell into the window of the cab, though I know I don't need to defend myself.

"Sure thing, Break." Cook laughs. "I'm sure she's teaching you all about the 'little death' as payment."

Viper nudges my rib cage. "We're just fucking with you. Her name's Sasha or something, right? She's really pretty and always wears those little dresses with the flowers on them."

My chest constricts, not sure if I like that he's noticed how pretty she looks in those dresses. She wears them a lot like Nanny used to.

"Didn't know you had a thing for girls with the way you look at Vi—" My boot hits Striker's knee and he yelps but starts to laugh. "Fine, girl's and dresses for Breaker," he says, avoiding my kick this time. "Doesn't matter, anyway. She's too old for you."

I want to tell them she’s not too old, but I keep my mouth clamped shut, digging my hand into my jeans to feel the little coins Cook gave me to buy my favorite candy. Little do they know that she likes me too. She has ever since I first saw her four years ago.

The first time I bought the red candies from the store where she works, she told me I could only have them if I gave her a kiss. It was just a peck on her cheek. She giggled the way girls do in movies, and her smile lit up her dark eyes. When she found out I spoke French, she wanted to learn, so now whenever I come to the village, we sit in the back room of the store, and I teach her words.

Sasha and I have been doing this all summer. If she didn’t like me, she’d not want to sit alone with me. And she’d not look at me with those dark eyes like she was wondering what my mouth tastes like.

I keep thinking about those dark eyes and her soft skin, and how her lips would taste, until the thin woods fade, and the open fields take over the landscape. The rows of potatoes and cabbage quickly turn to muddy patches dotted with livestock and barns, and the dirt road becomes cobbled streets patched with concrete. Each inhale brings the scent of damp earth into my lungs but then the faint smell of exhaust and engine oil mixed with the stench of sewers takes over as we enter the village. The buildings change from weathered wooden slats to stone with rusted metal roofs on some of them.

The brakes squeal as Cook stops the truck in front of the general store. After the cab door slams shut we all leap out, our boots slapping down on the wet street. Without a word, Viper heads toward the bakery with Striker.

“Back here in two hours,” Cook calls after them. Viper waves over his shoulder before they turn the corner and disappear.

“I’m going to pay for the weekly supplies.” Cook lifts his chin toward the large storehouse where we pick up our supplies as he pulls paper bills from his wallet. “Grab those white bars of soap and that big box of detergent Viper likes.” He waves to someone passing by on the other side of the street. “Oh, and the leather cleaner for your boots.”

I hold out my hand and he slaps the bills down on my open palm. “Anything else?” I ask hoping he’ll tell me to pick up some of that maple syrup he keeps in his room for when he makes pancakes. I miss that stuff.

I miss a lot of stuff Nanny used to give me. I miss Nanny, but she's not around anymore. The one time I dared ask about her, Fallon told me she moved away after that thing we don't talk about happened. Too many ghosts, I figured. Part of me is glad she's living in a place she's not haunted, but the other part of me feels so empty. I liked thinking about her close by, sitting in the little house I shared with her, missing me as much as I missed her.

But that was selfish of me, especially when I know how terrible being haunted by ghosts can feel.

I have many of my own.

"Nah," Cook says, eyes darting to the old rundown building with the flickering neon sign in the window. "Just meet us all back here. I'll leave __"

"Yeah, yeah," I say, turning away. "You'll leave my ass behind and I'll have to hike back."

"Don't think I won't," Cook calls, but he's already moving away, walking toward the storehouse.

I don't have to watch to know that he'll go and pay for the order he called in then head to the bar he visits every time we come to the village. I think that's the only reason he brings us along. We load the groceries for him, then one of us can always drive back when he gets so drunk he can't keep his eyes open.

The bell above the door chimes as I step into the store, my eyes moving immediately to where she usually sits behind the worn counter with scratched glass.

"Back here!" she calls, her sweet voice carrying to the front from stock room. I grab a plastic basket next to the door, and weave around the isles, noting the new items. Last time we were here, a large truck had brought in supplies from the city and Cook stocked up on a bunch of things we rarely get.

My eyes lock onto the maple syrup. Before I can think, I place it in my basket then grab the other items Cook wanted before heading to the back. I shove the swinging doors open, setting my basket on the floor by the old crates holding supplies. Then I stop in the center of the room and just stare at her.

The dress she's wearing today is blue. The color blue I don't like, but when she turns my way and I see her face, all the roiling in my gut from the

memories turns to ice.

"Why are you crying?" I ask, stalking forward. The urge to reach out and wipe her tears is strong but I don't do it because I've not really touched her before. A kiss on the cheek, arms brushing as we sit and write letters, knees knocking together when she laughs, isn't really touching her.

But now she's crying. She's the only girl besides Nanny and the nuns at church I've been anywhere near, so I'm not sure what to do. Anytime one of us cries at school, we either get called names or Fallon tells us to toughen up.

Soldat's don't cry he says.

But girls do and she's really fucking upset.

She shakes her head.

"Sasha, what happened?" I say, wincing as I ruin the words. I'm terrible at Russian. "Tell me what's wrong."

She laughs as I butcher the last word and swipes her cheeks. "Just feeling sad. I was thinking about my mother."

I step in close, raising my hand to touch her, but hesitate. Nanny used to rub my back as a boy when I'd cry, so I place my hand between her shoulder blades and rub in circles.

She gives me a watery smile, scooting in closer. "Do you miss your mother?"

I stiffen and drop my hand. We don't talk about the school. No one does. We come to the village, gather supplies, everyone smiles and treats us well, then we leave. No one asks questions.

I overheard Reaper telling Hunter that Fallon paid to fix the old roads and the metal roofs on the big buildings and that's why no one bothers to ask what he's doing with us all up at the old prison. Hush money, he said. Like in those spy books Teacher reads.

"I'm sorry," Sasha says and backs away. "I know better than to ask."

"It's okay." My hand feels empty, now. I liked touching her. A lot. So, I do it again. This time I move my hand lower to the center of her back and make little circles. She bites her lip, and my insides heat and get jittery like I gulped down that nasty black coffee Cook drinks.

"You don't look like anyone around here," she whispers. "I really like your eyes."

My insides turn electric, jolts of heat making my body spark. I'm taller than her, and she's somehow moved so our bodies are pressed

together. Her front to my front. My hand on her back. Her hands are now on my chest.

Now, one small hand with delicate fingers is moving higher toward my mouth.

“And these.” Her thumb presses to my bottom lip and I’m suddenly aware that my arm is around her and I’m still rubbing her back. Something earthy and clean invades my nose. Like right after it rains, but delicate and a little sweet.

I’ve never been this close to a girl besides Nanny. And I’m starting to wonder why.

“Is your hair dark?” she asks moving even closer, and then runs a hand over my scalp.

Shit.

Sasha’s eyes dart to mine. I attempt to back away so she can’t feel how much I like her this close but she stops me.

“It’s okay,” she whispers, pink lips pulling into a smile. That pretty smile she gives me when she says a word wrong, like she’s a little embarrassed. “I like you too.”

I lick my lips, because yeah, I like her a lot and she’s finding out how much since she’s pressed up against me.

“Have you ever kissed anyone?” she asks.

I’m about to tell her that I’ve kissed her cheek and Nanny’s, but that sounds pathetic. Admitting I’ve never kissed anyone sounds worse, so I say nothing.

When I don’t answer, she rises to her tip toes and her lips brush mine.

I must have decided at some point I was going to kiss her, because now we are. I’ve seen enough movies, those dirty movies Hunter found in Cooks room, and flipped through enough of those magazines Hunter stole from that run down store where we get gas, that I know what kissing should look like.

What it feels like is different. She’s soft and tastes like lemons and mints. Now that I have tasted her mouth, I don’t want to stop. She’s sweet and tangy. And her body is moving against mine, hands all over and then downward to—

“Oh shit,” I gasp. With a guilty glance I look back to the open door of the stockroom but close my eyes when her touch becomes too much.

“Do you like that?” she asks softly. Breathing is suddenly really difficult. I nod. “Let me see.”

Another glance over my shoulder, my body buzzing for several different reasons. “Right here? Now?”

She giggles. Then cool hair hits my skin.

“Wow,” she says looking down between us.

My throat starts to feel tight. Not in that way like it does with anticipation, but in a way that feels like I’m swallowing stones.

“Do you know what girls like?” she asks, moving away. My hand drops as I watch her sit down and lift her dress up.

My heart thunders but I’m frozen in place, something weird in my stomach making it difficult to move or breathe, much less think.

“We have time,” she whispers. “Come here.”

Several things happen at once.

There’s a booming roar from behind me like a wild animal crashed into the room. I’m shoved, somehow both backward and to the side, and Sasha is screaming, trying to stand but the man has her by her hair, his arm pulled back like he’s going to slap her and then I yell, “Viper stop!”

She crashes to the ground, and he turns on me, chest heaving. His eyes fall to my zipper. I fix it, my heart pounding, as a primal growl rips from his throat right before he says, “Go out to the truck! Now!”

“Let her go,” I yell, marching forward to grab Viper’s arm before he actually hits her. I know deep in my gut he’d never hurt a girl, but I’m starting to doubt that feeling with the murderous fury turning his eyes dark and hateful. “We weren’t doing anything wrong.”

He spins on me, eyes flashing with violence. “*You* weren’t doing anything wrong, but she was.“ He turns back, glaring down at Sasha but then stalks to me and grabs my arm. I look over my shoulder and see her scrambling to her feet, but she doesn’t come after us.

“Fuck off,” I yell at him, trying to shrug off his grip, my face so hot it feels like it’s on fire.

Viper shoves me through the store, then out the door. I trip over the entryway, and he catches me by the arm. He rips the passenger door to the truck open so roughly I’m surprised it doesn’t tear from the hinges. “Get in the truck,” he growls.

In all the time I’ve known him, I’ve never seen him so angry. Shame floods my cheeks, makes my heart skip. I wasn’t doing anything wrong,

nothing that he hasn’t already done, nothing that Reaper or Hunter haven’t.

“You’re just jealous,” I snarl.

My back slams into the truck bed as he pushes me away, then yanks me by my collar, dragging me closer. “I’m not jealous of her.”

“Yes you are,” I snap. “You wanted it to be you.”

His brows knit, eyes darkening strangely, but he knows exactly what I mean.

“She likes me, and I like her and you can’t stand it.”

“You’re a fucking child,” Viper grates. He points back at the store. “That is a woman, and she never should have touched you.”

“She’s the same age as you,” I tell him.

Viper backs way, running his hands through his hair. His cheeks burn red, mouth set into a grim line. “And, *I’m* too old for you.”

“Four years isn’t that much older,” I tell him.

“It is when you are a thirteen-year-old boy and she’s practically a fucking adult.” Using the collar of my shirt, he shoves me in the truck cab. “Stay right here while I get Cook and Striker.”

He turns, casting an evil glare at the store, breathing in and out heavily like he’s debating going in there and slapping her anyway. I slam the door shut and cross my arms, my teeth grinding as I watch him. When he turns back around, he is a tad calmer, but there’s a line between his brow and his jaw’s clenched.

Viper leans against the truck door, resting his hands on the open window. The stormy sea in his eyes calms and my stomach settles.

“I’m not jealous, Breaker,” he whispers. “I’m angry. The person to touch you like that should be someone closer to your age. Someone who loves you, not someone who gets off on taking things from innocent boys.”

“What the fuck do you know about love?” I grate out. “You’ve never even been in love.”

“That’s not true. I love you.”

“You’re my brother,” I say. “You have to love me.”

I’m surprised when he smiles. “You’re so innocent it makes my chest hurt.”

“I’m not innocent,” I snap. Viper has no idea what I did to earn my name. I’m filthy from the things I’ve done. Stained, permanently in my soul, from the things Fallon told me were okay to do.

“Stupid, beautiful boy,” he whispers and backs away. “I’m so glad you don’t even know what I mean.”

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Chapter 16

Striker

VIPER'S DISAPPEARED. I HAVEN'T seen him for three days. At all. When he realized that Breaker left, left him behind, he walked away without a word, and we let him.

What was I supposed to say?

Nothing.

The three of us made a promise to each other while trying to survive in the midst of hell that we'd never be apart. We'd always protect one another. And for the last fifteen years, we have. Only ever separating for a few days at a time.

As difficult as it's been, I've let him be, Reaper too. But this morning, Reaper flat-out ordered me to find him saying I'll be the only one who could coax him out of this dark episode. When I finally find him, Viper is in his room sitting on the edge of his bed facing the windows.

The sunlight slants across the dimly lit room through the open curtains, cutting long lines of bright white over his black shirt. His back is to me, but I can picture his frown from his posture. His shoulders slump, hands in his lap holding something I can't see. He hears me close the door, and turns his head, leaving his face in profile. My heart skips, seeing his full lips and the misery painting his features dark.

I hate it when he is upset. He either becomes quiet or grows angry. And from the fact we've not seen him, means he's retreated into himself.

When I come to a stop next to him, Viper holds up his phone. “You know we’ve never been apart more than three days since he stepped foot into the school and we’re already on day three?”

I take the phone, unlocking it with my thumbprint. My heart aches as I read the message that came through the day he left in the encrypted messaging app Breaker created.

B: I’m sorry. She needs us.

“I know,” I say. None of us have. With the exception of Reaper leaving for the wilderness, the four of us never been apart for more than a few days at a time and even that’s been few and far between the last few years. Most missions we do together, or two of us leave for a day or two and return once the job is done.

His heavy sigh as I set the phone down and sit next to him, makes me want to wrap an arm over his shoulder, but I keep my arms crossed, looking out at the window at the line of trees, wondering if we’re ever going to be whole again.

Not that we ever were. Fallon took us, broke us, and then pieced us back together with cruelty, doling out handfuls of affection when we least expected it. And even though we all know it’s toxic, the love he gave us was all we’d ever felt outside of the bonds we formed with each other.

But that last night with them, I felt the hope. I felt the possibility. The sweet sensation of what if, what if…

“What are we supposed to do?” he asks. I glance at him and catch his furrowed brows and haunted expression. I know he means Cora.

“We’ll figure it out,” I tell him, guilt eating at my gut. I should have warned him Breaker was leaving, but I knew he’d try to stop him or try to go with him. Breaker defying Fallon is enough. God knows what he’ll do if the rest of us tried yet again to go against him. “Besides, he’s there, so we know he’ll literally kill anyone who tries to hurt her.”

Viper nods. “That’s what I’m worried about. He’s so reckless sometimes.”

My laugh makes him frown. “You’re reckless, Viper. Breaker is impulsive.”

“How does he plan on keeping someone from touching her?” Viper asks. “He didn’t think this through.”

I quirk a brow. “This coming from a man who thinks nothing through?”

He scoffs but grins when I nudge his shoulder with mine.

“He’ll figure something out. And in the meantime, we get Delilah prepared.” When he doesn’t answer I say, “She’s absolute shit with a gun.”

“According to you, everyone is a shit shot.” Viper smirks, leaning back on his palms, gaze dropping to where our thighs press together. I’m not sure which one of us shifted. Probably him. He’s always been handsy and a little greedy for touch. He glances at me. “Our girl isn’t made to fire a gun. She’s made to slice throats.”

I picture her with the various guns I’ve had her try in the last two days and I think he may be right. She’s not terrible, and she is improving already, but everything about Delilah with a gun looks and feels unnatural. There’s something slightly feline in her movements, with her entire demeanor. She’s smooth edged and a little feral. All the guns I’ve placed in her hands didn’t fit her.

“She has potential with the knife,” Viper says, sitting upright. “Delilah is drawn to them. I think she likes the subtle violence, and the sharp edge.” He glances my way, and I see the gleam in his eyes has returned. “I’ll train her.”

My grin feels lopsided, and I tuck my chin to hide it. I fucking hate it when Reaper is right. “Good. Don’t go easy on her,” I say, even though I know he won’t.

He’s absolutely brutal when he’s training. I would know. Viper insisted on training me after we returned to the school.

He smirks, leaning back on his hands again, features softening, and I’m glad that sad look is gone. I hate seeing him low. When he gets like that, it’s hard to lift him back up. Breaker seems to be the only one to break his dark moods, so I’m glad I was able to.

Viper needs this. Princess needs to train with something she can excel at not just to boost her confidence, but her determination. Viper will be perfect for both.

“Has he told her yet?” he asks, eyes dropping to my lips, and I realize I’m still grinning, picturing Delilah with a knife, trying to slash Viper’s throat. I’m going to have to sit in on those lessons. I think he’s right. Our Princess is absolutely made for this.

When his gaze dips to my throat, then back to my mouth, I lick my lips, feeling how his body seems to tense and loosen all at once next to me.

All thoughts of Delilah slip away and I'm suddenly a bit too aware of him. His clean citrusy scent. The warmth of his thigh against mine.

Of course, my head floods with the images of him on his knees before me, but I shove that away.

"Not yet," I say my voice a bit hoarse. "Reaper wants her focused before he tells her our plans."

Viper nods, eyes still on my mouth. "Is our girl still mad at us?"

My cock stirs, all of me flooding with fire and the memory if his mouth on my cock. Consumed with how his body language is shifting, changing. Heating up next to me. I swallow and his eyes dip to my throat again.

"I think she's just upset at everything," I say thickly, my gaze snaking down to his chest. Lower. His cock strains against his tight fatigues.

Shit. I move to stand up but he grabs my wrist.

"Stop running," he says quietly. "Just stay." He releases my hand when my gaze falls to his dick again. "Just sit with me for a bit? Like we used to?"

I breathe in, filling my lungs as memories crash through my mind. The school was harsh, and Fallon, the environment, did everything to break us down. Make as cold and roughly hewn as our surroundings. And it did for the most part. But I don't think Fallon thought how when you put people together in a cruel place, they bond to one another. They seek comfort where there is none given.

My brother's and I may be callous and cold, but we still kept space for one another. Breaker was so young, so naive in many ways, and his need for affection forced us all to soften.

We've grown up together. Fought for our lives together. Clawed our way through the last few years, trying to piece ourselves back together after Hunter's death. We've fucked the same women, watched each other come with eyes open and our hearts bleeding.

We've hoped for the same things. Craved the same bodies.

We've formed our own family.

With a slight nod, I sit and lie back, crooking an arm under my head, my boots still planted on the floor. Viper lies down next to me, propping a heel in the edge of his bed. His shoulder presses tightly to mine but I find I like the contact. After a minute the tension evaporates, and I feel myself and him relax.

Keeping my eyes on the ceiling, they trace the cracks in the paster, down to the ornate crown molding to the peeling blue wallpaper. Marie Antoinette blue Breaker calls it. He was such a weird kid.

Then again, none of us have any clue what he endured after Fallon took him from the cold room. A shudder runs through me at the thought of three-year-old Breaker being left hungry and cold in that room for three days.

He never told us where he was before the school, just said he didn't remember and left it at that. I have a feeling that's a lie, but I never pushed him. Just like we never pushed him to tell us how he earned his name.

We all found out eventually.

Shit. I miss Breaker, too.

I turn my head to look at Viper's profile. He's so stupidly sexy that it's an assault to the senses. "Did he ever tell you why he calls it Marie Antoniette blue?"

He grins, shaking his head. "No. But it does remind me of the dress in her portrait."

The backs of our hands brush. I don't pull away and neither does he. We let them stay like that, flesh on flesh, slightly warming each other in the chilly room.

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Chapter 17

Cora

IT'S ONLY BEEN THREE days since I was brought back, and I'm already exhausted. How I'm supposed to survive this, I have no clue.

Each day has gone by in a blur. I go to work and stare at the stacks of papers on my desk. I leave work and go back to Rune's. Clyde makes me dinner I eat and go to sleep. It's mundane and uneventful and somehow, we've ended up outside of Zane's office for a meeting to discuss who knows what.

I'm spacing out more and more, like I'm floating through life barely feeling or seeing anything. I need to keep focused but the magnitude of my sorrow keeps pulling me under.

Clyde nudges my arm after he knocks on the door, and we wait for Zane's assistant to let us in. "Do you want me take you shopping to pick a dress for the upcoming fundraiser?"

Fuck. Why I keep forgetting about the event, I don't know. Maybe because the thought of being stuck in a public space as Zane's arm candy and future wife makes me want to dive out of my office window.

After our encounter outside the office building, I've managed to avoid Zane. Mostly I've stayed in my office, staring at the files that stack higher each day, wishing I was back with Delly.

Wishing my life was different.

Which is foolish of me. Wishing never got anyone anywhere. It's action that creates change. And as much as I know I need to do something

to stop this marriage to Zane, I can't seem to muster any energy. Not that I've come up with a plan, which is precisely what I need.

My only option to stop this marriage is so far from reach, I'm not sure it's even an option. I could very well end up signing my death warrant.

"Did you hear me, girl?" Clyde asks, gripping my shoulders and turning me so I'm facing him. "Are you even listening?"

No.

"Who are we meeting with again?" I ask, smoothing my hands down my pencil skirt to remove the wrinkles. He told me earlier, but I'm too busy being miserable to care.

Clyde opens his mouth to answer but the door swings open, and Zane appears with a huff.

"You're late," he says, gaze slipping up and down my body leaving oily unease every place his eyes skim over.

All my senses scream awake, Zane's proximity sending alarm bells through my head. I've been around him for years working in the same office, and maybe it's because he was so fixated on Delly that he never bothered me before.

He bothers me now. As does that angry, inconvenienced expression he's currently wearing.

"We're only fifteen minute late," I say, shoving him out of the way to enter his office. "I wanted to freshen up and eat something before sitting in on a meeting with a bunch of old men."

Zane follows me through the luxurious sitting room outside his office, past the shelves lined with books he's more than likely never read, and into his dark office. It's dark because of the fact everything is painted a deep forest green. The walls, more shelves with more books, the curtains over the modern windows. Mixed in with the modern sleek furniture are heavy ornate antiques that remind of the mansion back with the men.

This room reminds me of Reaper. Dark, brooding. Intense. Beautiful.

"Sit." Zane says, gesturing for Clyde to sit in one of the plush leather chairs, but Rune enters behind us and takes the seat. That's when I notice Dave.

Delly's sleazy ex-husband.

It's not uncommon for Dave to sit in on certain meetings to make sure things are done correctly, or at least done in a way ensuring Rune won't get caught. What's uncommon are the tell-tale remnants of two black

eyes, the skin around them slightly green like they're old. And… Is his nose a little crooked?

I smile inwardly. Rune must have questioned him, as Rune tends to do, after we were taken. Or Clyde. Or both of them. Being that he's still alive and still Rune's lawyer means they believed he had nothing to do with us being taken.

I, of course known that, but satisfaction swirls in my belly, picturing Clyde punching him over and over. He probably enjoyed every second, considering Dave cheated on Delly.

"Glad you're back," he says standing, but I wave him off. He opens his mouth, and I feel with every fiber in my being he's about to ask me about Delly but thinks better of it and sits back down.

"I take it Rune filled you in," Zane says, stepping up to the sideboard and pouring two fingers of whisky into a glass.

"I have no clue what today's about," I tell him, snatching his glass and slamming it back.

I hiss at the burn traveling down my throat, reveling in Zane's pinched expression, a perfect dark blonde brow quirking upwards slightly. If he wasn't such a perverted creepy asshole, he'd be stunningly handsome, but instead it's like a dark meanness seeps through his pores turning him slightly plastic and fake.

"You didn't tell her?" Zane asks, but he's talking to Rune.

I don't bother to look at Rune, but I can picture his slight shoulder shrug of indifference.

"But I told you my expectations," Zane snarls and all the niceness he was pretending to possess vanishes instantly, making my stomach clench

There he is. The Zane Devin I know. Rune's second in command. The one who threatens men who refuse to do his bidding. Who will steal hundreds of thousands from a rival without batting an eye. The one who helps Rune decide who to dispose of and who to keep.

"Does it matter?" Rune says. "It's done, so let's move forward."

Zane nods and sets the decanter down watching me as he does. The way his eyes skim my face, then move to my breasts feels like a different kind of violation. When his hazel eyes move to my lips, I give him a deadly smile.

He's giving me no choice.

It’s going to end up being him or me. If I learned anything from my time with the men, it’s that I will fight for me. Even if it kills me.

Zane rips his gaze away from my smirk, and steps back. I suck in air, not realizing his proximity, his slick eyes moving over my like invasive fingers, had me holding my breath. My nerves skitter along my spine as I watch him move to his ornate desk in front of the windows and pick up a large manilla envelope. He pulls out several sheets, skimming over them.

“It was taken out?” he asks, glancing up briefly to look at Rune. “It was part of the agreement.”

“Yes,” Rune says. “And as you can see everything is in order, but it may take a few weeks, maybe months for all I know before things are back to normal.”

Zane nods, glancing my way, then turns his attention to the papers in his hand. “Nothing to be concerned about? Everything’s clear?”

Rune gestures to the papers. “As you can see from the report, everything is fine.”

“Nothing that needs taking care of?” Zane asks, eyes landing on my belly for a heartbeat. “Or is it too soon to tell?”

“The test was negative,” Rune says and my stomach lurches.

“What test?” I ask, reaching for the papers in Zane’s greedy hands, turning over various reports in my mind, trying to figure out what sort of test they mean. My finger’s curl into the papers, glaring at him as I rip them from his grasp. It takes a second for the words to register, but when they do my gasp is audible.

“You gave him the results of my exam?” I nearly scream, marching toward Rune. Rage burns my cheeks, humiliation making my palms sweat. How dare he? He just continues to violate me, and I’m stupid enough to be surprised by it.

Behind Rune, standing by the door, Clyde shifts, clasping his hands behind his back, chin dropping to look at his feet. I pin my glare on him. How dare he have the nerve to look upset.

I turn back to Zane, shaking the papers in his face. “Was it you who requested the fucking exam? Needed to make sure your trophy isn’t tarnished?”

“You’re no trophy, and you’re already tarnished,” he says that slick classic Zane smile returning. Slightly smug and gleeful. “You’ve had enough dick in you that I’m surprised your tests came back clean.”

I step forward, shoving the papers in his face, but he smacks my hand away before I can smash them into his mouth.

This invasion feels so awful, my body flooding with shame, my gut churning with violence. I'm so sick of being violated. Used. Controlled. Humiliated for being female.

"Fuck you Zane," I seethe, taking a step away to stop myself from slapping him.

"I plan on it," he says, setting the papers down and leaning back on his desk, hands resting behind him on the edge. "But I want to make sure my wife's fuckable."

Wife. The word cuts me cleanly.

It's one thing to think about why I'm here. It's another to know it. Have them say it. Hear them discuss my body like my only value is between my legs.

The thought of Zane touching me makes me even sicker than Rune. I know where he's been. I know so many vile things about him the thought of Zane coming near me, the thought that he even *wants* to fuck me, makes bile rise in my throat.

I swallow it and my anger down, balling my shaking hands into fists as I lock my eyes with his. "I'm surprised you want someone so young, Zane."

His eyes freeze over, shoulders growing rigid. "What the fuck is that supposed to mean?"

Ignoring him, I head for the door. "This meeting is over."

Clyde comes alive, his body tense as he reaches for the door and opens it for me. He gestures for me to exit, casting a deadly glance Zane's way as I stalk through.

The man's been hot on my heels for days and I know why. I have a feeling Zane has suddenly become more of a threat than Rune.

***

Outside crickets chirp, and in the distance I hear the rev of an engine, making me glance up from my seat behind Rune's desk. With my heart hammering I place my palms on the wood desk wait.

After this afternoon, I know I need to do everything in my power to stop from being handed over to Zane. So, I'm in Rune's office waiting for

him. The only reason I'm risking being alone with him at all is because Clyde's in the house, and Rune wouldn't dare touch me in any way out of fear Clyde could walk in.

I think.

I hope.

As annoying as it's been having Clyde following me while I roamed from room to room, attempting to pout alone, I'm glad he's here. I just hope he stays a while, or Rune lets me return to my condo soon. Clyde may be Rune's closest and oldest friend, but I know he'll get sick of him sleeping in the guest room any day now.

I don't have much time.

By the time Rune comes home it's been dark for a while, and my nerves are frayed. When the front door slams shut, my heart shifts into overdrive, pulse pounding in my ears.

As he walks into the room, I clear my throat. Rune stops in the center of his office, blue eyes landing on me, when he sees me sitting in his leather chair behind his desk. He glances over his shoulder nervously, like Clyde's right behind him, wagging an accusatory finger at him for fucking me so many times in this office.

"What are you doing?" Rune asks features changing from shock to annoyance.

"I'm not marrying Zane," I say. "I refuse."

Rune's jaw pops and now that irritation is anger.

"You really think I'm just going agree to this?" I ask, my heart pounding so hard it feels like my whole body trembles with it. "Or were you planning on forcing me to sign the marriage certificate and hand my assets over to Zane like a good little wife?"

He drops his briefcase on the wingback chair I sat in the other night and steps forward, bracing his hands on the desk as he says, "You're going to do exactly as I say and you're going to thank me for protecting you your entire life."

My laugh makes him stiffen, and some remote part of my brain knows I should be scared, but I'm so sick of being taken advantage of. Being forced to do things I don't want. I wanted to go to dance school, but no, Rune said I was going to take violin. When I wanted to go off to college in another state, I wasn't allowed. I was sent to the same school as Delly so he could use us to hide his millions.

Now I’m supposed to marry Zane so he can gain control over my money and the shares of the corporation I inherited from my parents There’s no other reason he’d arrange this marriage. I learned long ago Rune cared about money, sex, and power. And he’s got all three of those from me.

Viper said power is created. Rune’s created his power over me using fear.

Not anymore.

“You’re going to have to find another way to steal my money and my shares, Rune,” I say standing up. “I’m not a puppet. You don’t pull a string, and I move in any and every direction you tell me.”

“Ungrateful brat,” he grates, the anger turning harder. Meaner. Making his handsome face contort cruelly. “I’ve given you everything. I took you in, cared for you. And when it’s time for you to repay me, you refuse?”

“Repay?” Somehow I manage not to scream. “For what Papa? For raising me with my parents money? For threatening lawyers so you can steal portions of my inheritance?”

“That money is mine,” he says voice deadly low. “Your parents—“

“Are traitors and dead,” I snap. When did I become so bold?

“And I took you in and raised you as my own,” he says, tapping a finger down on his desk to emphasize his statement. “I sent you to private schools, hired tutors, you had a fucking good life because of me.”

“As your own?” I sneer. “Do you bend Delly over your desk and fuck her too?”

Rune’s entire body goes so still, as if he turned to stone. “Careful, girl.”

His warning grates across my skin. My stomach lurches and my body goes rigid, waiting. Because I never know what to expect from Rune when he’s angry. He could lash out. He could walk away and save it for later. He could verbally tear me apart. Physically hurt me.

I keep my eyes pinned on his and see the change. My heart skips with fear, but I can’t seem to move. It’s like this every time. He’s trained me to fawn or freeze and right now I’m frozen in place, feet stuck to the ground as I watch Rune slowly walk around the desk and step in next to me. He grips my arm, right over the bandage and squeezes. I yelp in pain, but he slams a hand over my mouth, pulling me close so that his body molds to

mine. I feel his dick, growing harder against my thigh, making my already roiling stomach sour with fear. With hatred.

When I jerk sideways, trying to get away from him, he squeezes my arm even harder and I gasp in pain.

He leans in, breathing heavily on my neck. “You’re playing with fire,” he whispers. “Don’t make your Papa teach you a lesson.”

His grasp on my arm releases, but that dangerous gleam doesn’t leave his eyes. Rune’s hand lands on my lower back. The touch feels like a punch even though it’s just a graze of a palm as his hand follows the curve of my ass and snakes lower. Lower still.

Without thinking, I bring my hand up and it lands hard on the side of his head. He must be so stunned that his hand drops and I shove him back, rushing around the desk to put something, anything solid between us as my mind screams, over and over that I’m going to pay.

Stupid girl.

When I’ve rounded the desk I turn to face him, feeling his rage clawing at my back like a tiger. He’s still standing in front of his chair, body rigid with rage, eyes boring holes through me.

He leans forward, propping his knuckles on his desk. “You’re going to marry Zane,” he says coldly.

“So, he can fuck your pretty little girl?” I ask, heart thundering so hard I can barely get the words out. It’s like I’ve tasted freedom, savored being defiant, and now I can’t stop. “I wasn’t aware you were okay with sharing.”

I don’t know how his teeth don’t crack with how hard he’s clenching his jaw.

“I will not marry Zane,” I say, backing away toward the door.

He has the fucking nerve to laugh.

“Call it off, or I’ll tell Clyde everything.”

If rage had a color, it’s the shade of red that burns on Rune’s face as he shoots forward, teeth bared, fury twisting his features. “Don’t threaten me, girl,” he snarls.

I suck in air, trying to keep my hands from trembling as I reach for the doorknob behind me. My fear slick palms slip over the cool metal. Terror floods my chest, and my heart nearly explodes as he marches closer.

“No one will believe you. You’re a nasty fucking whore and everyone knows it.”

I grip the knob, but he’s on me. My back hits the door as his hand wraps around my throat, fingers digging painfully into the soft place under my jaw. I don’t fight. I know better.

Using his body to trap me, Rune pins me to the door, making panic and fear tangle in my throat. He’s not a big man, not like our men. He’s fit for his age, lean muscles like a runner, but not much bulk. It’s his meanness that gives him strength, and he’s using every ounce of that meanness against me now.

Stupid, stupid girl.

“Everyone knows you’ll fuck anything with a dick,” he whispers, spittle hitting my face. I flinch at the venom in his voice but gather a breath to spew my own. I open my mouth to tell him that I fucked his daughter, so it’s not just dicks anymore. That I ate her cunt, and she did mine when his hand slams over my mouth trapping my words in place. “No one will believe that I, the man who took you in after your mother murdered my wife, her best friend over money, would ever lay a finger on you.” He drags in a breath, anger and hatred making his chest heave. “No one would believe that the man who raised you as his daughter would ever—“ his hips punch and his dick hits my belly, ”—ever hurt his little girl.”

His hand smashes into my nose, forcing my head to the side, his slick palm slipping over my cheek. A tear breaks free.

He’s right.

All that pain that was let go when I confessed. All that hope that I was safe. All that stupid courage I felt after telling Delly and the men what Rune had done to me, vanishes.

My mother was right. I am a stupid girl.

And Rune’s right.

No one will believe me.

No one with any power to do anything.

Clyde may be Rune’s advisor, but he’s just that. He holds no power. Not over a man like Rune.

His hand smashes harder down over my mouth and he leans in to sweep his lips over my cheek. “Cora, my little girl, don’t cry.”

More tears leak out, slipping down my cheeks and pooling where his hand covers my mouth. Rune grinds his hardness into my waist and I gasp out a sob under his palm, the tears flowing freely. His hand drops from my mouth, but the one at my throat squeezes tighter. Bile rises in my throat,

nearly choking me as his vile mouth drags along my jaw, ragged breaths like rank fumes along my skin as his lips skim down the side of my neck, over my collarbone, then down to my breast. My fingers curl into the wood door at my back, fear making my limbs weak. When a soft kiss lands on the top of my breasts, my body goes still.

"Papa," I whisper, panic needling up my arms. Down my back. Making my hands clench into fists. I want to push him away but in the past any time I've tried, the consequences have been so much worse.

"*Shh*," he whispers, heat seeping through my shirt and searing my skin.

I already know what's going to happen before he does it.

I know from the last time I tried to stand up to him.

Rune presses against my windpipe, so hard I choke on my gasp just as his teeth sink into my flesh though my shirt. My scream is trapped in my throat, agony ripping a hole through me as he bites harder. Harder still.

When he finally lets me go, pain stabs through my chest. I crumble to my knees, gasping for air through my sobs.

Be quiet. Be quiet. Clyde can't hear.

"Get up," Rune says. "Go to your room and I swear to god, Cora, never threaten me again."

He uses the tip of his shoe to nudge me out of his way and the door shuts quietly behind him.

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Chapter 18

Cora

THE FAUCET DRIPS, ECHOING around the silent bathroom. *Plink*, *Plink*, *Plink*. The noise drills into my head, but I can't seem to move to adjust the knob and make it stop. The cold tile floor under me is my only anchor to reality, my mind moving too quickly, sorting through the images of Rune, Zane, the time with the men, Delly, all so quickly it's hard to focus on one single thing.

There's too much to be upset about.

My hand hovers over my breast, tears burning my eyes. It hurts too much. Not just my skin, but deep in my bones. In my soul. I squeeze my eyes shut, picturing Reaper as he promised he'd always come for me. That I was his Baby Girl. Theirs. And they never let the things they claim go. But then it gets taken over with the feeling of Rune's teeth sinking into my flesh, and vomit burns in my throat.

"Cora," Clyde's strangled whisper leaks through the closed door.

This is the third time on the last hour he's come to the door, asking if I need something.

Them. I need them.

"Go away," I say, angrily swiping at another tear that slipped out.

There's a thud on the door, then it's quiet on the other side. A few minutes later the flimsy lock pops and the door swings open. Clyde strides in holding a glass of water. Without a word, he opens the cabinet and removes the alcohol. Adjusting his sleep pants around his waist Clyde

crouches next to me and shoves up the sleeve of my shirt to check the bandage on my arm.

“I don’t want you near me,” I say. I don’t say I don’t want anyone near me because every time someone comes close, I’m hurt even more than before.

“Liar,” he says, avoiding my eyes. “You love me and couldn’t live without me.”

He’s not wrong. He also thinks I’m just upset over the meeting in Zane’s office today. God he’s in such denial.

“Why?” I ask. “Why Zane? There’s got to be a reason he wanted me.”

“You’re right,” Clyde says, placing a new bandage on my arm and tossing the old out as he sits back on the floor next to me. He looks so old right now, weathered. Tired. I wonder if I look the same. “You’re the next best thing.

“Wow, you really know how to lay on the charm.”

“Just like you guessed, you have your parents money and shares in Rune Corp. You own several homes and land and you’re a Julian.” Clyde stretches his legs out in the bathroom floor next to me, rubbing his bad knee. Sports injury or something. Maybe when he was training as a young man. He told me once, but I don’t remember. I wish I’d paid better attention now.

“My inheritance is a curse,” I tell him. “And a fuck ton of good my name does me.”

Clyde drops his chin, looking down at his hands in his lap. “Your parents were respected.”

Until they weren’t.

“Tell me what happened tonight,” Clyde says, looking back up to meet my eyes.

I avert my gaze. Of course I do. It’s not easy to look someone in the face and lie to them. I’ve only ever done it to protect them, and myself, from the truth and what it would do to everyone I love.

“Tell me what happened in his office.”

My eyes sting, so I keep my gaze fixed on the white tile floor. Part of me wants to tell him. He’ll believe me. He’ll also lose his mind and kill Rune.

And then what? Zane will have Clyde's head. Then mine. And then what happens to Delly?

What happens to everything else?

"I told him I refused to marry Zane," I say thickly, swallowing down the urge to scream. "He didn't like that."

Clyde makes a huffing sound. "I don't imagine he did. Then what happened, Cora?"

My eyes meet his. There's something there, some acknowledgement, like he *knows*. Maybe not exactly what Rune has done, but what he's capable of. I need to remember that Clyde's been with Rune for years. Standing by him, taking orders to kill and enforce. Clyde may not want to admit out loud what Runes capable of doing especially to me.

Maybe I'm in denial too. Clyde is a dangerous man. He's Rune advisor which is just a fancy way of saying he's an enforcer. A killer. He's Rune's weapon. It may have been Clyde who either killed the men's brother or chose which of Rune's soldiers to send to have him removed.

"Cora," Clyde says, tapping my arm. "What happened?"

"He told me I had no choice," I say, keeping our eyes locked, praying the stinging in my eyes doesn't betray me. "And that was that."

His nod tells me he understands. His next few words confirm what I already know. He really has no idea that the man who raised me, hurts me. "Rune hated your mother. But he loves you."

"He has a funny way of showing it," I mumble.

His frown makes me regret my snark. Logically I know none of this is Clyde's fault. He's protected me as best he could. It's not his fault I never told him about Rune. It's not his fault my mother was who she was. I never told anyone about her either.

Even though I hated her, I admired my mother's courage. Caroline Julian may have been the worst kind of person, but she was a savvy business woman. Intelligent and knew how to coerce people to do her bidding.

My father was merely her puppet. At a young age I knew that. She would smile sweetly, shower him with kisses and praise and the next thing I knew, we were on a trip a country I only vaguely remember, or out on a new yacht, her male yoga instructor in tow.

I wonder sometimes if my father feared her more than he loved her and that's why she always got what she wanted. And what my mother

wanted was power. She craved it like demons crave blood. She sucked it out from anyone who came near her, absorbing any power they possessed and used it as her own.

That's the mistake Rune made. He trusted the wife of his partner like he did his own family. He trusted she had his best interest in mind.

The only concern my mother had was for herself. I remember vividly just how that felt when she nearly killed me in that closet and her only worry was what would happen to her if someone found out.

That cuts a person in half. That gut wrenching feeling, the mind shattering knowing, that the one person who's supposed to love and protect you doesn't care at all.

I remember that heartbreak all too well because I experienced it over and over with Rune.

The worst part about remembering are how the bad parts never leave you, and the good seems to fade all too quickly.

Some people remember just shadowy bits from their childhood. Just fragments of time, captured like photographs, torn at the edges, faces cut off, or parts scratched out.

My memory is just fine. Because I remember every detail. The wood door against my nails. The smell of my dried piss. The throaty moans of people in far off rooms. I remember their faces too. The men. How their teeth showed, like rabid animals when they smiled at my mother.

"*Prissy, come sit on my lap."*

"Are you okay?"

My vision snaps to focus, the room returning to bright clarity as Clyde moves to a crouch in front of me.

"You're starting to worry me." The skin around his mouth creases as he frowns. There's salt and pepper stubble on his cheeks and for the first time I really look at Clyde.

His dark eyes framed with dark lashes. His deep skin, lined with the wrinkles of a man in his fifties, now furrowed between his brows, as he watches me with so much concern, I don't know why I want Rune's love so much when I obviously have Clyde's.

His eyes dart back and forth between mine, like he's trying to determine my mental state. "Did Rune hurt you, Cora?"

With a deep breath, I shake my head.

"Stand up." I tell him. "Your knee is bad."

With a lingering look, like he’s trying to determine if I’m lying, he stands and looms over me, quirking a brow.

Gunshot. That’s what his knee injury is from. Not an accident.

“I want you to learn to defend yourself.” Clyde says. “I know a guy.”

I nod absently. It doesn’t matter if I can defend myself. What good will it do against men hellbent on breaking me? I’m still powerless against powerful men.

Men who take and consume. Devouring anything and everything simply because their greed outgrew their humanity. If they even had any to begin with. When you grow up being told you’re the best, you think you are. When you grow up knowing nothing can touch you, when there’s no consequences for your actions, you learn you live not just above the law but that the laws of common men don’t apply to you.

And people, wives, children, they become nothing. They are trophies or a bother. They are of little importance beyond how they can serve you. And it’s amazing what men will say when they are in the company of a woman they think holds no value.

Or what people will say in front of a little girl who’s nothing but an inconvenience

I stand up, looking at myself in the mirror.

I look just like her.

My mother.

Same green eyes. Same red hair. You could hold up a photograph of my mother at the age I am now, and you’d think it was me using one of those old photograph apps.

Cora. Caroline. The only difference is what we carry on the inside.

Funny how I keep being reminded that I’m her blood, like poison runs in my veins. I’ve been told over and over how being her daughter has made me vile. But they forget that my mother was smart. Cunning.

Fucking ruthless.

Maybe I’m more like my mother than I think. Maybe Rune was right to hate me and try to break me down.

But, I am my mother’s daughter.

She may have left me forgotten in a dark cold hell for days, but she trained me and never knew it. I watched her every move, learning exactly when the monster in her would strike out at me, and in doing so, I learned exactly how to get what I need. It’s helped me survive Rune.

It’s about to help me avoid Zane.

“Come on, old man, we’re leaving,” I say to Clyde, leaning in to inspect the light bruise on my neck. It’s barely visible, but I know it’s there. The pain of his bite throbs, the reminder of his hatred marked into my skin. Just like my body still feels every single place I’ve been violated or abused my entire life. Every moment etched into my bones as a memory.

“Where are we going?” Clyde asks, following me as I march down the hall.

I turn to face him, feeling in control of myself for the first time in my entire life.

“We’re going to the estate,” I tell him.

“Right now?” He glances down at his plaid sleep pants, then cocks his head to the side, brows knitting as his eyes narrow on me. “Why?”

“I need to gather a couple of things,” I tell him, leaning over the railing to make sure Rune’s no longer in his office.

No light bleeds from under the door.

“Are you sure?” Clyde asks, from behind me as we continue down the stairs.

Oh. I’m sure.

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The estate earned its name because of its size, not its location. When one thinks of vast family estate, images of a massive old world mansion sitting on lush open fields come to mind.

Not this place. My mother wanted the best, and twenty years ago, the best was a huge, three story, Spanish style beast of a mansion set back from the beach by a wide lawn and massive pool. When I was younger we had security guards wearing open neck shirts, and walkie talkies. Palm trees in massive pots lining the veranda overlooking the ocean.

If you were to envision a drug lords mansion in Miami in the 90s the house I lived in was it.

None of that is here now of course. My mother died fifteen years ago and everything about her was forgotten. Who she was. The empire she and my father helped Rune create.

It’s all mine now, what little Rune didn’t manage to coerce lawyers into signing over to him when he became my legal guardian. Like what

should have been my half of shares to Rune Corporations. With help, he dwindled that down to only a quarter and made sure I have zero control over it until after his death when Delly inherits his fortune.

Actually, I can't touch much of my inheritance. What little I have left, Rune doles out to me each year, controlling me in every way possible. Rune thought he was smart putting his two beloved gems in charge of his money, but he failed to see that when you're fucking over the girl who signs your checks, she can see everything you've ever done.

And has receipts.

"Are you sure you want to be here?" Clyde asks, watching me closely as I march toward the front door, keys in hand, prepared to enter the home where my mother hosted her famous parties, various men catering to her to quench her desires. Or maybe it was my father who loved to watch my mother get fucked.

Not that I have room to judge. I've never judged her. Not for that. Just for being an abusive, shitty person.

"Yes, Clyde, I want to be here," I lie because I don't. Of course I don't want to be here, but this in my territory and I need what's inside this house.

The faint sound of a motor engine revving further down the street sends my heart fluttering with nerves. Every inch of me feels strung out, buzzing with anxiety. I pause in front of the door, my fingernails stinging with that phantom pain, insides trembling. But it's not fear over why I'm here, it's the memories that lie beyond this door that's making my breaths shaky.

With a deep breath, I slip in the key, and I hope Clyde doesn't notice how my hands shake. If he does, he says nothing. The door creaks open and I freeze, one foot slightly raised over the threshold.

A flood of memories slaps me in the face. My eyes dart to the stairs leading to the second floor where my bedroom and playroom were. Then drift over to the dark hallway leading to my parents massive office, like I can see in the outline of the closet where my mother put me.

There's still claw marks on the inside of the wood door.

I know because I looked the day I was told she died so I wouldn't cry over a woman who found me a nuisance.

Clyde shoves past, heading for the light switch and flicks in on. Nothing happens.

“Bulb must be blown,” he says.

Once I turned eighteen, Rune set up an account for me with some of my inheritance. With it, I had the electricity to the estate turned on and every few months someone comes out to clean and check for any needed repairs.

To this day, I don’t know why I keep this place up. I could sell it and make quite a bit of money, but the times I’ve received an offer, I’ve never been able to go through with signing the papers.

I think I like that her ghost is trapped here. Maybe I like that mine is stuck here too.

Stepping in, I shut the door behind me. The air tastes stale. Like dust and dry earth but the faint scent of roses floats in the air like my mother just brushed past.

Clyde tries the large lamps resting on the entry table and yellow light floods the space.

I glance around, trying to suppress the images.

Maybe coming here was a mistake. Even as the thought comes to the surface, I know it’s not true. If I’m going to do this. I need what’s here.

“What now?” Clyde asks. “Why are we here?”

I think I’ve never really thought about Clyde’s devotion because we’ve always had it. I never had to live without it, so I never knew it was something to be so thankful for.

Gripping his shoulders, I stand on my tiptoes and kiss his cheek, then point to the hall leading to my parents office. The second my foot slips into the dark hall, panic squeezes my lungs in a vise. I pause long enough to blink back the old fear, and march forward, refusing to be controlled by memories. If I wait, if I let myself hesitate for a moment longer, I won’t open that door and I won’t follow through with this plan.

But I have to.

I’m so sick of men thinking they control of my life, my money, and my body. That they can decide my future.

Well, no more.

I know a little something Zane will want me to keep quiet. And if he wants me quiet, he’ll do everything I ask.

Before I can change my mind, I shove the door open and walk into my parents office.

Darkness tries to leach into my mind and the silence of the house attempts to drag me back to hell, to the place where all my memories wait, but I remind myself this is now. Not then. I'm here, with Clyde who will protect me even if it's from the dark things living in my head and stalk forward so determined I see nothing besides my parents desk. Not the overly decorative furniture, not the long art deco styled couch my mother entertained guests on.

Clyde's silent presence offers steady reassurance as I take the large picture from the wall behind the desk and set it on the floor.

"Well shit," he says. "Now I feel like an idiot that I never knew they had a safe hidden there."

"Sometimes the most obvious things are the hardest to see," I say as I unlock the safe. It's my birthday which is so ironic that it makes me want to weep. No one would ever think my mother would use my birthday so of course that's what she chose.

The thick metal door swings open with a creak. I pull out the files my mother kept under the boxes holding her most valuable jewelry. She was great at organizing and I admire how she color coded everything, making sure to include dates and names.

I find the name I want and slip it from the stack. Pictures slip out and I gather them up before Clyde can see and stuff them in an envelope I find in the desk drawer.

"What are you doing?" Clyde asks as I put the files back and shut the safe.

Securing my future, I think but don't say.

I stalk past him, ignoring his stream of questions and head up the stairs to my mother's room. She had a separate bedroom from my father. The queens quarters our staff called it. I didn't understand why until I was older.

My mother was the queen of her castle, and we were all just her pawns.

Once in her room, I brush past the canopy bed, the vanity still laden with her old face creams and make up. Glass bottles of perfume and large brushes. At her walk-in closet I stop, and swing the door open.

The light flickers for a minute then settles with a buzz highlighting the past like an exhibit in a museum. It's like she was just in here. Shoes lie tossed on the corner, clothes strewn about, belts and purses flung

haphazardly around. I remember I'd sat on her bed watching her get dressed that day, asking about her dresses and why she needed so many.

My mother was in a good mood that day, and she'd let me ask questions. And I ate it up because she wasn't annoyed with me.

She'd seemed excited.

Then I never saw her again.

Trialing my hand over the hanging clothes, I think about that day and how I didn't know it was the last day I'd ever see her. Part of me is glad that little me had that memory of her. That I could carry that sweetness she'd shown me that day through life. Most of me is sad for that little girl who so desperately wanted her mother to be nice to her had to grow up knowing that while Coraline Julian was capable of being a decent mother, she simply chose not to.

At the back of the closet, I reach her gowns, and sort through them until I find the right one. Tossing it to Clyde I say, "Have this cleaned. I'm wearing it to Zane's function."

Clyde gives me that head cocked to the side, brow quirk again, and right when I think he's going to ask me, *Why this dress Cora?*, he says, "This was your mother's favorite dress."

The sizzling dread that's been sitting in my stomach for days has morphed into a perverse excitement. "I know," I say moving past him to exit the closet.

And so does Zane.

Stupid fucker. He doesn't know what's coming. Hopefully when he realizes what's hit him, he won't try to have me killed.

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Chapter 19

Breaker

15 Years Ago, September, Age 13

A CHILLY WIND SNAKES through the trees, making the leaves shiver. Night fell a few hours ago and with it the temperature. We're used to the cold, but this chill feels different. It's a little wet, like it's sticking to us, seeping under our skin.

We walk close together, eyes darting around until we reach a thin clearing. Animals come out at night, and we're unarmed. The last thing we need is to come across a bear or wolf.

"This is as good a place as any to set up camp," Striker says.

After we heard the buzz of a small plane, then saw it flying west over a break in the trees, we started in that direction, following the impression of the tire tracks in the dirt until they disappeared, and we weren't able to locate any more. Viper said they must not travel out here often enough, or use a different route each time, since the tracks faded.

“The plane means a landing strip, and that means the truck was left,” he says, hands on hips, looking up at the night sky.

He would know more than us, since he’s at least had some training. Also, Cook tends to trap him in conversation about his hunting days before he came to the school. Which, as bored and annoyed at Viper looked every time we managed to slip away and leave him, I’m glad he got stuck there because at least he knows something.

Striker drops to the ground in front of me, pulling his knees to his chest. “We need a fire,” he says, “to keep the animals away.”

“Doesn’t fire attract animals?” I ask.

“No clue,” he says with a shrug.

God. We’re so fucked.

“Do you know how to set up a snare?” I ask Viper, who’s now sprawled out on the ground, leaned back on his elbows, so relaxed and uncaring, you’d never know we were sent out to the wilderness unprepared and years too early.

“Yes,” Viper says. His eyes meet mine. “We’ll be fine.”

“The fuck we will,” I say, sitting down. “Reap and Hunter got months to train for this. We have had zero. Do any of us know how to hunt?”

“We know how to make snares,” Viper offers. “And Strike can hit a moving target from several yards away.”

“If he had a rifle,” I snap, absently digging my fingers into the tightness squeezing my chest. “We just have a knife.”

Striker’s shoulders stiffen as he props his chin on his arms crossed over his knees. He’s staring blankly at his feet, wearing hopelessness like a cape. I know he’s worried, not about food, or how we’ll acquire it. Not even about water or how to find it.

He’s worried about which one of us won’t make it out of the wilderness.

Hunter’s words ring in my head. They make my gut churn, so I shove the them away, my gaze moving back to Viper.

“Why do you think he sent us early?” I ask him. He’s four years older than us, so he ought to know more. Strike’s only fifteen. He knows about as much as me, which considering I know nothing, isn’t helpful. I’ve only been in training for eight years and the first five were spent learning language and math and history. The last three I learned how to hold a knife

and shoot a gun. I'm not supposed to be out here until I go through combat training like Reaper and Hunter and received at least a crash course in survival training like Viper.

Thank fuck we have him. We'd be screwed. We wouldn't have to decide who makes it out of here alive, nature would do it for us. Natural selection would choose me and I'm well aware of it. I've not even finished with my growth spurt Fallon swears will make me bigger than everyone. Like some secret wave of manhood to wash over me and magically make me stronger. Beefier like Viper. Grow muscles and height like Strike. Strong and mean like Reaper and smart like Hunter.

"We'll be fine," Viper says again, and I wonder if he actually believes his lies.

How he can be so calm? I'm about to start punching something, breaking something, lose my mind.

He sent me out here to die.

The thought scalds through my mind like acid, eating away at all logic. I'm worried Fallon sent me out here so he wouldn't have to deal with keeping me a secret anymore. Father warned me never to tell my brother's about Nanny. Now he's going to get rid of me because he must regret even bringing me to the school.

I'm a pain in the ass, he says. Can't listen. Always breaking rules. And the day I was named…

He has to regret that. Letting me be who I am on the inside. Unleashing that part of me Nanny always said was living in my chest. In my heart.

"Panicking won't help," Viper says, sitting upright and pulling his knees to his chest. He's one to talk. He's bulky and fast and mean. Nothing out here would be stupid enough to attack him. "If we stay calm, we'll survive the week, find the lodge, and then we go home."

Striker makes a sound that is almost a laugh. "You know we all won't."

"Yes, we will," Viper barks out, so much anger in his voice Striker stiffens. "I refuse to let anything happen to either of you."

"Who says it's going to be one of us?" Striker asks.

Viper's gaze slips to Striker, the dark night flooding his blue eyes with shadows, making him look deranged. Then again, I think maybe he is a

little. He's the only one of us three who remembers who he was before the school.

"You going to slit my throat in the middle of the night?" he asks the tic in his jaw just as intimidating as his tone. "Do I need to worry, brother?"

Striker rolls his eyes. "You know that's not what I meant."

"You know only two return," I add unhelpfully, which gains me a lethal glare from Viper. He's almost as good at giving them as Reaper.

"And I said, we *all* go home," Viper snarls. "This isn't the test."

Striker leans forward. "I wondered the same thing."

"What do you mean?" I ask. "We're here. In the wilderness."

Striker shakes his head as Viper says, "Maxy dear sent us out here. Not Father."

I scrub a hand down my face, letting his words sink in. "Why? Why would Maxim send us out here?"

"No fucking clue." Viper lies back, propping his head on his arms crossed under his head and stares up at the night sky.

I look up too, taking a deep breath. The stars gleam, like thousands of tiny gems turning the world around us a shimmering blue.

"Do you ever wonder why we're here?" I ask, leaning back on my hands, then crossing my legs and sitting upright, too restless to be still.

"Because God is cruel and ruthless," Viper says. "Because we had the misfortune of being born in this world, right at the wrong time, in the wrong place and picked by the wrong man."

I glance over to find Striker watching me, his mouth pulled down into a frown. "I wonder all the time."

I nod and look down at my hands. They aren't rough or as callused as Viper's, but they're nearly as big. Reaper says I'm going to be a big mother-fucker but I think he is just trying to make me feel better for being so young.

"Does it matter why?" Viper asks. "We're here and we either survive or we don't. And survive is what we're going to do."

Striker nods, but I can tell he's unsure. Maybe even more than me.

"We stick together," Viper says. "No matter what."

A scream breaks the night, turning my skin cold.

My gaze snaps to the dark trees looming around the clearing. "What the fuck was that?"

“Fox?” Striker says and we all hear the panic making his words catch slightly. “That could be a fox right?”

Another scream and my bones turn to ice.

“That’s no fox,” Viper says, going deadly still. His eyes meet mine. “That scream came from a woman.”

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Chapter 20

Breaker

I WAS EIGHT WHEN my ghosts came to visit me. They appeared in a dream like a gauzy mist. In my dream, my fingers ached from how cold it was, and every time I breathed out, I could see the ghosts leaving my chest. I dreamed I was in a room that was entirely blue, the walls rolling like waves. It was the same color blue as the room Father rescued me from when I was just a boy.

In my dream I'd thought about how the monster in my chest breathed fire, the way bad things tend to do, but it did me no good since I was so cold. My monster was of no use to me in my dreams because he didn't stop the ghosts from breathing their cold breaths into my lungs.

Then the mist turned to claws, gripping my throat and I screamed.

Viper woke me up with a kick to my bed. He had asked me why I was screaming and crying in my sleep. I told him that I was dreaming of the cold, blue room, where Father had rescued me.

It was strange to see how his face contorted. The moonlight streaming in through the tiny window high above my bed turned his pale face pure white and I remember thinking his eyes looked so similar to that blue room, but instead of cold, Viper's eyes were warm, like pictures of the sea.

"He didn't rescue you," he'd said. "He put you there, then brought you out three days later."

I opened my mouth to argue but Viper had never lied to me before.

“He put us all there when we came to the school.” Viper dropped to a crouch by my bed, glancing over his shoulder to the open door behind him. “But you,” he whispered, “he put you in there and then took you out and sent you somewhere else.”

Nanny was my secret. On my first day of school I learned that my brothers all came from different places, some living in large group homes, and others barely surviving on the streets. Reaper and Hunter were the only ones who refused to talk about where they came from. I wondered if maybe they had a Nanny too, and didn’t want to tell the others so they wouldn’t feel so displaced and unwanted.

My memories before the school are full of love and warmth, and hugs and kisses. There were pancakes on Sundays and a toy car I played with. When I came to the school, I held on to those memories using them to keep me sane. Keep me soft in the places Fallon tried to turn hard. Even when I earned my name, I clung to that bright past, just as I had clung to Nanny’s favorite yellow dress when we walked through the village.

Like right now, I’m clinging to my sanity because my Little Red is just yards away, and I can’t get to her. No matter how much I want to snatch her up and throw her on the back of my bike to take her home, I can’t.

Home. I want her with us so bad it hurts. To wrap my arms around her. Kiss her sweet lips. Run my fingers through her hair and smell that slightly sweet, completely her, scent. Flowers and fruit and darkness.

I want to see her eyes when she realizes we’ve not abandoned her to this fate. That every single promise we made that night was true.

I’d fucking kill before I let her go.

I’ll fucking ruin anything and everything before she is anyone’s but mine.

Ours.

Viper must be losing his shit by now. I’m not there. He can’t get to me. He can’t come after her. He’s bound by our plan, and his need for revenge.

Revenge. That’s what has led us here.

The irony doesn’t escape me.

I lean back, adjusting my helmet, my boot on the paved drive, crossing my arms over my chest, my eyes on the house across the street. With a glance over my shoulder, I check the windows of the house behind

me, to make sure no lights have come on. I think it's vacant but have no idea if any staff or security keep an eye on the grounds.

A light blinking on across the street snags my attention. I lean forward, gripping the handlebars. Even though I can't see inside, I can see movement through the cracks in the drapes. Lights pop on, one after another on the first floor. After several minutes, lights flood the second floor, then the third.

We never bothered getting a diagram of the estate since neither woman ever came to the house, so I have no idea which room she's in right now. Cora kept the property up, but this is the first time she's stepped foot in her parents old house since we've been watching her.

My skin itches, my chest constricting. While I'm grateful for Harlow's dedication to protect our girl, he's also making it hard to access her. And fuck I want to get my hands on her. Make sure she's safe. Unharmed after spending three nights in that house with Rune.

My phone pings. I pull it from my pocket and check the camera's we installed around the perimeter of Rune's property, years ago. We were never able to get any inside, but thanks to the many camera's we placed, I can now track who comes and goes.

He's returning home.

He has no security team left, which I'm hoping we can use to our advantage, but I'm still having to resort to using our old system to keep track of everyone. Thanks to the camera I have overlooking the front gate, I see his driver pulling the SUV into the circular drive, and parking near the steep steps. I managed to put a tracker on his vehicle that I think won't be discovered if his driver does a sweep of the car, but it was still a risk. One I'm willing to take even though Rune hasn't changed his routine much.

Watching them for four years means I have everyone's schedule memorized.

Except for the last few days, no one is doing what they usually do. Rune returned late to his home, then left about an hour later. He's not been gone long and since he's back, I can only assume he dropped by the office and came right home.

Cora's only left the house to go to the office then returns to Rune's every evening. Tonight is the first time she's gone anywhere after sunset.

And it's killing me. I want to know what she's doing in her childhood home.

What would she even want in there? After hearing what her mother did, it's understandable she's avoided the house all these years, but something happened that's made her come here.

Something with Rune.

It *had* to be Rune.

I rub the knot in my chest, trying to keep my shit together. Everything in me screams to march to the door, rip it down and drag her away from this nightmare.

I've debated just breaking in so I can at least get close enough to find out why she's dragged Harlow to this house of horrors, but I have no idea what type of security system the house has, if it's even armed, and no way of hacking into it since I don't have my laptop. That's even if I could. I'm decent with software, but better at extracting information from people.

Right when I'm about to abandon my bike and jump the wall, the front door opens and Cora marches out. She has that determined lilt to her step, like when she's decided something and is going to see it through to the end, even if it kills her.

Yeah. I know what determined march. I've watch her long enough to know she's up to something. Clyde walks out a minute later, stopping to lock the door, a garment bag slung over his arm. She climbs into the SUV. He pulls his phone from his pocket, types, then re-pockets it before sliding into the car.

I shrink back into the shadows, as headlights sweep over the street. When the taillights become tiny dots. I maneuver my bike out of the driveway. My phone pings and I pull it out to read the screen.

Fear, anger, pure red rage makes my heart hammer.

Fuck

Reaper is going to fucking kill me.

Fallon may actually shoot me.

Viper is not ready.

Striker…

Fuck.

I take a deep breath as I reread the text. My gut roils with desperate fear. What I'm about to do is going to set everything into motion and there's no going back.

One last glance at the text and I know I what I have to do.

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Chapter 21

Delilah

DAY SIX WITHOUT CORA and desperation floods my veins. The training and target practice they say will get me back to her isn't going well.

And I'm getting really sick of not hitting the target. I'm also sick of Striker waking me up at the ass crack of dawn, handing me my freshly washed black leggings and TEAMPLAYER hoodie, then telling me to get dressed so we can do warmups. Warmups consist of stretching our legs before he takes off, leaving me in the drive wondering why this is necessary so early in the morning.

We then run from the drive to the end of the road that snakes along the little cliffs, shivering at first from the icy wind blowing in off the ocean, then wiping sweat off my brow when we make it back to the driveway. Striker's tight ass as he runs ahead isn't a bad tradeoff, so I focus on that as I suck chilly morning air into my lungs and ignore the burn in my legs. But after days of this, even his perfect body isn't a good enough distraction.

I hurt. Everything hurts. Muscles in my feet ache from running in these stupid boots. My arms are sore from lifting weights, which they had me do exactly two times. And talk about awkward. Having three large muscled men, who've all been inside me, watch me struggle with thirty pounds is humiliating.

I'm also sick of being given just long enough to stuff food in my mouth after our run before Striker takes me to the makeshift range and has

me shoot various weapons, his handsome face growing tense as he becomes more and more frustrated because I'm a terrible shot. I mean bad. My bullets land everywhere but the target. It must have been beginner's luck because I'm awful and barely improving. Striker says I just need time, but I'm doubtful.

After I'm nearly in tears, frustrated by my obvious lack of skill, Viper leads me to the large empty room with the faded oriental rug and chipped plaster walls to teach me how to hold a knife. I laughed the first day I was told he was going to show me how to throw it, but he didn't, so I quickly shut my mouth. Then he handed me the one I picked out, showed me how to hold it, pointed to the target I failed at shooting that morning and told me to throw.

I did. Then screamed with excitement when it actually landed in the black rings.

My second attempt failed and skimmed the tree, but my third hit and then my fourth and now we're focused mostly on training with a knife.

That was four days ago and now I'm spending several hours a day with Viper.

"You're doing well, Sweetheart," he says, not out of breath at all, which is really annoying considering I'm panting, already sweating, and have stripped down to just my sports bra and my leggings.

Even though the room we're in isn't heated, my skin is still flushed, but I'm starting to think it's not from the exercise, it's from being manhandled by Viper. The fact he chose this room, the room where he first gave me the little knife, doesn't help. The memory of that day flames through me each time our eyes meet. As does the tension pulling between us, stretching, thinning, until I feel like I'm about to snap and drop to my knees, tongue out and ready for him.

That heat I felt with him hasn't left. It's grown to an unbearable size.

He taps the side of his throat. The mask he's wearing differs slightly from the ones he usually wears. It's still black with the skull and fangs, but it stops halfway down his neck, revealing a fair slip of skin with stubble. "Remember to always go after the arteries."

Sucking in air, I take the same stance as him, knees loose, arms up and ready but tucked close to my body. I circle to his left, my training knife up and at the ready, like he showed me during our first session. We're currently practicing a move that requires me to grapple him by wrapping

my arm around his chest, then moving up behind him so I can either stab him in his neck or under his shoulder blade. When I asked why we weren't using the real knife Viper said he was only thirty-two and wasn't ready to die just yet.

I didn't realize he was six years older than me. After that little confession, I've spent too much time wondering how old Reaper is. Striker, I think, is in his thirties too, and Breaker looks somewhere around my age, but Reaper remains a mystery.

They all do.

"Focus," Viper says. "You're not focused."

Does he blame me? Desire flows from him like molten lava. I'm not the only one affected. His gaze caresses me, lingering on my exposed skin with a haunting intimacy.

"Come on, Princess, you can take him."

The room falls silent as Striker enters, and my shoulders slump under the weight of his presence. When our eyes lock, a fire ignites within me.

When Striker wasn't in here this morning, the relief that washed over me was enough to calm my nerves some. Now that he's currently leaning against the far wall by the door, crossing his arms over his perfect chest, a grin curling his lush lips, there's no way I'm going to focus on anything other than them now.

Three days of this.

Three days of absolute torture.

"Keep those steps light and don't stiffen your body." Striker pushes off the wall and moves in behind me. He taps my rear. "Limber. Keep everything moving and ready to fight."

I gesture to Viper before me, huffing out a breath. "I can't take him. He's huge."

A single wink makes my cheeks flush. "I've seen you take him just fine, Princess."

Viper taps his neck again. "Come on, Sweetheart. I know you have it in you."

Shaking my head, I resume my stance, knowing he's too strong, too muscular, too everything, and the worst part is my body is too aware of all of this.

Viper is really sexy.

I've spent the last three days being thrown around by him, his large hands on me, touching my body in ways that are instructive, helpful, but leave my skin flaming and my blood singing. Every time he tries to correct my stance with a large hand on my thigh, my belly dips, and our eyes lock. When he repositions my arms, all I can picture is me bent over his bed, him taking me from behind.

Like I begged him to do days ago, and he refused.

It took a good two days before the sting of rejection and humiliation left. It's helped that he's not brought it up, and it's definitely helped they've kept everything so structured that every minute of the day is full of training, running, eating, grappling, and knife fighting that I don't have time to think about the fact they aren't touching me.

Or talking to me much at all.

And I didn't realize until this moment how much it grates on me.

I didn't realize until just now, standing in the middle of this empty room with rough wooden floors, how much I want another night with them. How much I crave their attention as much as their touch. They made me promises, claimed me, told me I was theirs to use as they pleased, yet none of them have come near me. Not even Striker, which hurts.

It *hurts* and I don't know what to think of it all. I'm so confused. Naming this ache in my chest as want feels like a betrayal to Cora. I shouldn't want anything other than her back. In my bed. In my arms.

"Sweetheart," Viper says, snapping me out of my thoughts. "Eyes up here."

I drag my gaze up from his crotch and focus on his masked face. Next to me, I feel Striker step back and I cast a glance his way. When I see his gold eyes slipping over Viper's tight shirt appreciatively, a scream threatens to break free.

If *he* can't even keep himself in check, how am I supposed to? There's so much sexual tension in the room, it's difficult to think, much less breathe.

I spent almost two weeks with Cora in my bed, giving or receiving an orgasm multiple times a day. Then we had an amazing night with the men, and now my body roars with want. And none of them are touching what they've claimed. I've resorted to reaching between my thighs after every session with Viper and Striker, seeking relief, my pussy greedy for some sort of stimulation to ease this constant craving. I hide in the

bathroom for privacy since I don't know if they're watching the cameras, and use my fingers to pull a quick, rough orgasm out of me, leaving me feeling somehow overly sexed yet under-stimulated.

I'm so fucking frustrated.

"Ready?"

I blow out a breath, swiping my pony tail over my shoulder as I adjust my stance and my hold on the training knife, feeling the weight of it in my hand.

"Now."

I dart forward. Viper steps to the side. Instead of wrapping my arm around his chest to trap his bicep that's entirely too strong and large for me to pin down, I dip low, sliding under his outstretched arm, moving around to his back. I kick the back of his leg, the tip of my boot hitting the back of his knee. Viper grunts, leg giving just as I arch my arm and stab downward. The rubbery blade connects where his shoulder meets his thick neck.

"Aw shit," he grates, but he grips my wrist, forcing me to drop the knife as he pulls me forward until my chest hits his back. He bends, dragging my body upward. My scream of anger gets cut off as he pulls me, head first, and I tumble over his shoulder, landing hard on my back.

Air bursts from my lungs. My eyes widen in shock, my lungs fighting, screaming as the wind's knocked at out of me.

"I said neck," he says, looming over me as I try to suck in air. "Not my collarbone."

Panic takes hold as my lungs fight.

"Give it a second, *mo leannan,*" he says, softly. "If you try to force the air into your lungs, they'll fight you. Relax."

Fuck him.

Fuck this.

Fuck *everything*.

I'm tired. I suck at everything but throwing a knife, which does me no good, according to them, if someone is close enough to grab me.

I gasp as air finally floods my chest and I bolt up, hot, angry tears flooding my eyes.

"Hold on," he growls, gripping my arms to spin me to face him. "Why the tears?"

"What is the point of this?" I scream, flinging my arms out and kicking the rubber knife with my boot. It's childish but I'm so fed up, I

don’t care.

“So you can defend yourself,” Viper snaps, just as Striker says, “So we know you’ll be safe.”

“I’m a fucking accountant,” I scream. “And an accountant with a knife is useless against a gun.”

Striker’s eyes fall to the floor as Viper takes a gigantic step toward me, but I stumble back, hysteria bubbling in my throat.

“I know what guns do,” I snap. “I know that you never even have to touch someone to kill them. I know because no one laid a finger on my mother, and I watched her die in front of me.”

Viper’s entire body goes rigid.

“You know everything about me, right?” My voice scratches out of my throat, hoarse with too many emotions I can’t face. Ones I’ve refused to deal with are now simmering, boiling inside me, spilling all over. “You know what soap I like, what food I like. You’ve researched me, because you know I’m Rune’s weakness. That means you know I was right there when they shot her. That her blood hit my face and my dress, and no one came near her.”

I suck in air, my throat raw. Tears warm my cheeks, and I swipe them away, irritated at their appearance as I turn and stop dead in my tracks. Reaper’s in the doorway, eyes closed, hands braced on the frame like he’s holding himself up.

I take in deep breaths, trying to hold back the tears, but eventually surrender and let myself cry. For everything. Cora. Me. All the things we’ve lost. Rage churns my gut, hating that they’re seeing me yet again fall apart.

Viper’s hand lands on my arm, but I slap it away, fury making my vision blur. “Don’t touch me.”

He ignores me, fingers clamping around my arm, dragging me forcefully against his chest, as if he intends to comfort me.

An angry snarl rips free, even more tears flowing freely. I struggle against his hold. “I don’t want you to touch me.”

Viper’s grip tightens, arms around my stomach, masked face dipped down to the side of my neck. Something dark tangles up with that rage snaking through me, coiling up tightly with a desperate need to *ruin*. Like I’ve been.

They’ve ruined me. My father betrayed me and hurt my best friend. He’s a perverse monster who’s, business ties and enemies made him

responsible for my mother's murder and the nightmarish images living in my head. Striker's gentle affection chiseled me down to nothing. Breaker's promise to protect Cora hacked away at the walls around my heart, leaving me exposed. Viper's dangerous heat threatens to destroy me, and Reaper.

Fucking Reaper.

Striker's face softens, like he can see the devastation they've all caused, and he reaches for me, but a wild, roaring storm crashes through my chest.

"I said, I don't want you touching me," I seethe.

The heel of my boot connects with Viper's shin. His grip loosens and I dip, snatching up the knife, spinning on my heel to face him. With one hand, I jab downward like I'm going to stab his thigh, while I block his other arm. He moves quickly, swiping my hand holding the training knife away. I bolt sideways, repeating the movement we've been doing all afternoon and move around his back, but this time I keep moving, coming around his other side and dropping to a crouch just as I shift my hold on the knife, and stab upwards, aiming for his groin.

The rubber end meets its target. Viper hisses out a choked sound, dropping to his knees, holding his crotch. "Aw, fuck, Sweetheart. That was vicious."

Strikers surprised laugh bursts from him as I stand, chest heaving with years of hurt and anger coursing through me like hot tar, watching as Viper rolls forward, head to the floor.

"How long before he bleeds out?" Reaper asks. My head snaps up to meet his eyes. "You just stabbed him in the nuts with a hunting knife. How long would it take before he bleeds out?"

My gaze darts to Viper. "Too long. But he's disabled."

Viper groans.

Striker laughs, offering his hand to Viper.

"Not for long," Reaper tells me. He motions to Viper, who's slowly standing, gripping Striker's shoulder. "Next time, stab the artery in the thigh. Then when he's down, stab him in the eye, then slice his throat."

I bite my lip, giving a quick nod in understanding as Reaper walks towards me. When we're boot to boot, he leans down, whispering in my ear. "Good job, Kitten. But we're going to have to work on that lying." I turn my head to catch his eyes. They drop to my mouth. "Because we all know you want us to touch you."

His thumb lands on my bottom lip, swiping at my smirk before he walks from the room.

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Chapter 22

Cora

I'VE SLEPT LIKE SHIT for the last six days. My days are bogged down with emptiness. Fear fills each night. Fear that Rune will send Clyde away and come for one last fuck in my childhood bed, like the pervert he is. Emptiness because parts of me feel scattered about. One piece sits in a large, run-down mansion in the room with the bed I shared with Delly. Another with a dark, broody man who barely talked to me, didn't touch me but promised to care for me like he'd known me for years. More lie with a man who made me feel safe and coveted, touching me gently, yet so full of hunger it was as if I was his alone to worship. Another piece sits with a man whose feral energy leaked of want, making me feel bright and new when I've always felt dark and used. And my last piece rests in the hands of a man who reminded me I was strong, who looked at my shattered heart and didn't turn away. Instead, he showed me his.

That's not true.

Striker doesn't hold the last piece of me.

They all carry parts of the woman I want to be, but I hold my pieces together.

I belong to me.

Rune hasn't said anything since the night in his office. No one's said anything about Zane at all. I've not been allowed out of the house besides going to work. I'm allowed to go out to the pool, down the dock, but when I tried to walk to the end of the drive, peering around the gate to find the

source of the revving engine I keep hearing, Clyde grabbed my arm and dragged me back inside.

Clyde, my ever-present shadow. He's been here all week, making meals with me since Rune let the staff go. In all my fifteen years in this house, I've never spent so much time with Clyde. It's like the man's developed abandonment issues. Or he's terrified something bad's going to happen to me.

Like Zane.

Now that I have a plan, I need to enact it, but I can't until I see Zane. But between his obsessive talk with Rune in the meetings all week as they wait for a response from Snyder about the deal, or his chatting about his lodge buddies coming to the fundraiser, I can't get him alone.

And the strangest part isn't that I'm not allowed to leave, that Zane seems to be more interested in rubbing dicks with this Snyder guy, or Clyde's overprotective presence; it's that no one's talking about Delly.

I can't wrap my head around why no one, not Rune or Clyde, is asking me questions and wanting to know more. Details. Something. Anything.

I don't understand. It's like Delly stopped existing. It makes me wonder what kind of man their father is and why Rune isn't retaliating. It makes me wonder what Rune did to their brother.

And it makes me wonder *why* Rune killed him, to begin with.

I mostly sit in my room when I come home from the office. I don't know what to do with myself. I'm barely even a person anymore without her here. My entire life was so wrapped up in work and Delly and going out nights to pick up some random stranger who would leave me feeling slightly less empty than Rune. But at least those nameless men made me feel like I had control over parts of my life. Over who was touching me.

I know Delly's fine, and they have some sort of plan for her, but Rune doesn't. It makes me think they've had communication beyond telling me to come back. Maybe the silver-haired man is communicating with Rune.

In between crying quietly into my pillow or pacing aimlessly in my bedroom, I nap or sit in front of the TV with Clyde, watching reruns of *The Great British Baking Show.* If I try to sit in my room alone to pout, Clyde will stalk in and either sit next to me on my bed, sprawling his long legs out on my pink comforter, and read or drone on about work.

Interest almost sparks when he talks about how Snyder contacted him, expressing interest in Rune's deal. I remember when we finalized the sale of their chain of hotels across the west coast last month, how difficult it was to get ahold of anyone in his company. It was hard to even get him to sit down long enough to hash out the details. He'd finalized the sale over video call, from his yacht as he took Rune for millions.

Chain of hotels. I'm no fool. Rune paid an ungodly amount for that chain. And while we did end up with the hotels, I know Rune ended up with something else. Drugs. Smuggled artifacts. Who the fuck knows at this point?

Now, Clyde is sitting next to me in my bed, taking up too much space as he flips through videos on his phone. He tells me that thanks to this previous sale, the Snyder Group is donating a huge chunk of change to Zane's fundraiser.

I glance his way, my stomach dropping. He sees my expression and nods.

"Yes, girl, the fundraiser." He pats my head. "It's tonight. We need to arrive early to greet guests."

I slump down in the bed, covering my head with my blankets.

"We do this every year, Cora," Clyde reminds me like I need it.

Lowering the blanket, I peer over it, ensuring he sees my frown. My eyes fall to my nightstand where I've stashed the envelope. I *need* to get Zane alone.

Clyde nudges my leg with his shoe, but I duck back under the covers. "Get up, or we're going to be late for work. Rune wants you to type up the contract today."

I roll my eyes even though he can't see me under the blankets. He nudges me again, and I sit up, tossing the covers off.

"Why isn't he trying to get Delly?" I ask.

Clyde recoils, confusion and something like concern flickering over his features.

"I was returned and no one talks about her. I don't understand."

He takes a deep breath. "We're waiting."

"For what?"

"On information." Clyde pockets his phone and stands, looking up at the ceiling. He's in a suit today, which means another long day at the office

avoiding Zane. “We are waiting to see what those men want in return for Delilah.”

I clench my teeth. Revenge is a vile thing. It makes people do heinous things. Rune killed their brother, they took Delly to retaliate. And they didn’t just take her, they turned her against him.

No. Cora. You did.

There’s a part of me that wants to tell Clyde she’s okay. That he can give up hope she’s ever coming back. Because when she does, Delly won’t be the same person. She’s theirs now.

And so am I.

But I clamp the words behind clenched teeth, and slip out of bed, walking toward my closet. When I open it, the dress Clyde had sent to the cleaners crinkles in the garment bag.

Reaper’s words flash in my mind. I’m theirs. I’m hers.

I belong to who and only who I choose to give myself to.

And it will never be Zane-fucking-Devin.

Tonight might be my only chance to get him alone. If I play my cards right, I’ll be free of him soon.

Then, I can focus on what’s important.

“Come on, girl, get dressed,” Clyde says, opening my bedroom door. “You need to get this contract typed up.”

***

The deal Rune wants isn’t a deal at all but an invite.

I type up the NDA and the rest of the contracts for each owner of the Snyder Group and watch, foot tapping, as the printer spits out pages. The paperwork includes the fees charged per year for membership and what Rune calls “The Wilderness Experience,” which is just a name he made up to entice the people he invites to join.

I don’t bother reading it over, but I glanced at it before I printed it out. All that it stated was that the new members would get the whole “Wilderness Experience” after they had passed the initiation. When I read the word “initiation,” I pictured a bunch of overgrown frat boys during hell-week, all dressed in Camo, hazing some old banker by tying him to a chair and making him chug from a keg before hopping on an ATV’s, rifles in hand.

As the pages spit out one by one, I can’t help the nervous jitter in my stomach, writhing like a snake and tangling up in my belly.

I can’t pinpoint it, but something isn’t quite right.

Not with any of this. Not with the fact Rune’s not frothing the mouth, trying to get Delly back. Not with Clyde following me around like a guard dog. Not with this invitation for the Snyder Group to join Rune’s lodge, and certainly not with the fact that Zane hasn’t said a single word to me since I stormed out of his office a few days ago.

As if the fates hate me enough that just the mere thought of him conjures his presence, Zane’s standing in the doorway of the resource room, hands in the pockets of his slacks, rocking back on his heels.

“Busy?”

I gesture to the massive printer, papers still spitting out.

“Is that the contract?” he asks, stepping forward. His excitement is palpable. “For the Snyder Group?”

“You know it is Zane,” I say, not bothering to hide my annoyance.

He rests a hip on the counter, holding supplies, hazel eyes dipping to my breasts. “Do you have your dress for tonight?”

A grin curls my lip, my insides fluttering. “I have the perfect one.”

His gaze doesn’t leave my breasts as he says, “It’s a masquerade ball. I think the theme is the Seven Deadly Sins.”

“Of course it is, Zane. You’re the expert on living each sin to the fullest.”

He leans forward, one hand still in his pocket, the other gripping the counter. That gross cologne her loves invades my nose. “I don’t expect you to like me. You liking me isn’t a concern of mine.”

“Good because I don’t.”

His grin makes my skin crawl. “But you have to act like you do, Cora. This marriage is for our families.”

“Let’s be real, Zane,” I snap, my face heating with anger. “This is for money and to get your slimy ass in good with Rune.”

“I’m already in good with Rune.” He winks, and I debate hitting him. “And yes, this is about money—“

“My money”

”—and about connecting our families.”

I let out a biting laugh. “This is a business transaction, Zane. Say it for what it is. You marry me, then you take control of my finances, my

shares of Rune’s company, and then my life.”

He nods, a smirk turning up the corner of his mouth. “Like I said. Business.” He scoots closer, making me cringe back. Just his heat in my space is invasive. “And when I fuck you—

“You’ll never touch me or my money,” I hiss, my mind filling with images of my past and my future horror. “You’ll have to kill me first.”

“If that’s what it takes, my sweet little fiancé, I’ll fuck your corpse, then buy my next yacht with all your traitor money.”

“You would know about traitor money,” I say before I can think.

He steps back, eyeing me. “What did you say?”

“You’re a snake.” My smile is poisonous I push past him. “See you tonight, *fiancé*.”

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Chapter 23

Cora

I HATE THESE FUNCTIONS. They involve fake people with fake smiles, all pretending they're decent humans who actually care about the environment, homelessness, or hungry kids. Tonight, we're at the Museum of Art, so it's about preserving art expression or something.

I didn't care enough to remember.

I guess I'm one of those people, too.

Most of the guests don't care enough to remember, either. They only do it for a tax write-off and to clean up their image. Zane's charity ball is an excuse to rub elbows with politicians, local law enforcement officials, and other corporate moguls so they can pat themselves on the back for going another year without being sent to prison. I think he just likes to dress up and uses these functions as an excuse to meet up with his lodge buddies. They come every year, too, and I hate being stuck in the same space as them.

Delly calls his lodge his boys club, and she's right, although many have their wives join them for the yearly hunts.

Don Zimmer and his wife joined last year. And another, older man, I can never remember his name but loves to squeeze my ass whenever I have the misfortune of attending a meeting with him. There are three others, but I only remember their faces, not their names. Every single member is a business associate of Rune. Most he's known for years and has held a membership almost as long.

If I’m actually forced to marry Zane, if my plan doesn’t work, I wonder if he will want me to go with him? The thought of being stuck in the middle of nowhere, dressed up in hunting gear, as we chase some poor deer through the woods makes my stomach ripple with dread.

My plan has to work. I just need to get Zane alone.

I lean forward and grip the metal railing, leaning against it as my eyes scan the city shining before me. Miami Beach shines with millions of little lights like a star-studded sky. Behind me, the sheets of glass and metal of modern architecture clash boldly with the sea spread out to my right.

The faint scent of seawater floats in with the warm breeze. I turn my face toward it, picturing the gray ocean and craggy cliffs, the old mansion with creaking floors, chipped paneling, and peeling wallpaper. Delilah’s smiles as I crawled into bed with her. How her face scrunched up before she came all over my hand.

How beautiful she looked, filled up with cum, dripping in Reaper’s lap.

Reaper.

Viper.

Striker.

Breaker.

“Are you going to stay out here all night?”

My teeth gnash together as Zane’s voice grates over my skin like cold shards of steel.

“If it means avoiding you, then yes,” I say, not bothering to open my eyes or turn to him. I feel him move up next to me, his arm brushing against mine. His touch burns like acid on my skin even though his arms over covered by his tux. I shove him away, disgust turning my words sharp. “Don’t touch me, Zane. I’ve already made the rounds with you.”

His hand lands on my lower back. When I shift, trying to slip out from under his grasp, he grips the fabric at the back of my dress to keep me in place. It draws tight over my belly.

“You’re going to rip my dress,” I snap.

Surprisingly, he lets me go.

“That would be a shame. It’s a lovely dress.” His eyes slip down the sleek red fabric, his greedy eyes drinking in the way it shapes to my body, then back to the red mask over my eyes. “It looks good on you.”

I’m surprised he doesn’t recognize it. It was my mother’s favorite, after all.

I touch my mask, the little wristlet purse holding my phone and the envelope hitting my arm, reminding me I need to act tonight. With a wicked grin, I trail my finger along the red feather on the side of my mask. His gaze follows my hand then dips lower, roaming over me like he has a right to look at me so hungrily. Like he’s picturing all the ways he’s going to fuck me the second those papers are signed.

Memories make my skin itch, and my nails hurt.

“I never thought such a bloody color would look good on a redhead, but you pull it off, Cora.”

I step toward him, feigning worry as I press the back of my hand to his forehead. “Are you okay, Zane?” I ask. “Your compliments are concerning.”

He smirks, brushing my hand away. “Fitting you came as lust. Lust. Slut. The perfect anagram for Cora Julian.”

“Ah, and he’s back.” I give him a sultry smile. “Actually, I came as wrath.” I point to his overly decorated mask. Asshole came as greed, his green, silky mask covered with gemstones around his eyes and down the cheeks. “I see you didn’t even bother to hide what you truly are.”

A playful wink. “No point.” He gestures to me. “But how pretty your wrath, Cora.”

My smile shows my teeth. “My wrath is quite vengeful.”

“So feisty for someone so small.” Zane does that whole body perusal again, making me regret allowing myself to get snared by his games, and I step further from him. “Tell me, Cora, did you fuck all of them? At the same time?” Zane takes a step closer, leaning down to whisper. “How does that work? One in each hole? What was the fourth one doing while the other three were busy fucking you like a common whore?”

“Common whores give great hand jobs,” I say as I hold up my hands, waggling my fingers. I lean in, conspiratorial, “But you forget Delly was with me in the club. Plenty of available holes for them that night.”

He doesn’t like that. I can tell by the slight way his jaw clenches. His obsession with her verges on pathetic.

Zane leans in, looking me square in the eye and it takes everything in me not to shy away from him. “Do you know who they are, Cora? What they did?”

“I know who you are and what you did.”

That makes his eyes narrow. I should keep my mouth shut but can’t seem to control it lately. Right when I’m about to tell him to fuck off and leave me alone, music from the open doors drifts out, and my heart starts to pound.

I brush past Zane, shrugging him off when he tries to grab my arm and walk back into the large open room where people mill about, talking, laughing, and drinking a bit too much.

In the corner, near the bar, a group of people gathers around the large grand piano, watching whoever’s sitting at the piano pluck out the delicate tune.

One I recognize.

I heard it enough times in the three weeks I was there.

Tears spring to my eyes, and I suck in a lungful, hoping to ease this sharp pain in my chest. There were several nights when I was there, and I’d hear the music coming from the large room at the back of the house. I’d creep downstairs, only to find the door locked as one of the men sat inside, playing the same song repeatedly. Delly sat with me a few times, holding me as I cried.

It seemed impossible that someone could make the music sound so hollow. So desperate. So lost. But it matched how I felt most of my life—confused by the shit life I was given. At times, it was angry, the piano becoming stormy and loud before it would smooth out, the tune suddenly delicate but full of sadness.

It’s what I feel right now. Angry and Sad. So confused.

“You alright?” Clyde asks, stepping in next to me. “You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

I smile weakly, leaning to the side to see if I can spot the person playing. I want to ask them the name of the song. I want to curl up and cry.

“I think I want to go home,” I say, touching his arm. Clyde’s wearing his perfect tux and all-black mask. I don’t have to ask to know that he came as—wrath like me, but in the form of death.

He peels his eyes off the group around the piano and nods, but Zane comes up behind me and hooks his arm in mine. “Ready to make another round, fiancé?”

“Fuck off, Zane,” I say, casting a pleading look at Clyde as Zane pulls me away.

When I spot Rune, my stomach roils. The last person I want to be near is Rune, and that's saying a lot since I'm currently being held captive by Zane.

Behind us, the music fades, and the crowd bursts into applause. I turn just in time to see the flash of a all-black lion's mask with gold around the eyes and nose before the man turns his back to me. All I see is the smooth, deep skin of the back of his shaved head.

Pride was playing.

"Snyder showed up," Rune says, lifting his chin in the direction of the man.

Of course, the Snyder guy would show up as pride, just like the assshole. He was too arrogant and self-important to actually come into the office to sign papers. We had to do it all digitally. Delly was so irritated that she shut off the video feed shortly after we logged on so he wouldn't see her face. I barely even remember what he looked like—just large aviator glasses and smooth dark skin.

It must be the same guy.

"Did you send him the invite?" Rune asks Zane, who nods and says, "Sure did."

I don't bother hiding my eye roll. I make sure Rune and Zane see it. "Boys will be boys and all that toxic shit," I say, jerking free of Zane's hold. "Excuse me, gentleman, I have to take a leak."

Rune's face scrunches up. "Why do you insist on being so vulgar?"

I smile sweetly, patting his cheek as I pass. "Because a vulgar man raised me."

Rune's jaw clenches, his features hardening. I must have a death wish. Or maybe after so many weeks free of him, tucked safely away from his sickness, I know what it feels like to be from under his thumb, and have grown bolder, more confident in my ability to fight him.

And I need to make sure I keep that freedom.

It's now or never.

***

I hide in the restroom as long as possible, then wander around the large gallery, chatting with a few of Rune's associates. When I spot Zane in the corner of the room discussing an art piece with Zimmer's wife, I give him a

giant smile and slip out of the gallery and down a dark hall lined with offices. As I walk I try the handles of each door, until find one open.

With a glance over my shoulder and my stomach fluttering, I rush through the door. It's a plain office with a simple desk and metal filing cabinets, which seems a little disappointing for an office in an art gallery. The only artful part is the large picture window framing the cityscape beyond.

I don't bother turning on a light. He'll find me. With my feet propped up and some art curator's desk, I scroll through my phone and wait. A few minutes later, the office door opens, and Zane slips in.

Right on time.

"You're like a fucking zit," I tell him. "Popping up and ruining my day."

"Oh, we're resorting to schoolyard insults now?" he says, stepping into the office and shutting the door. His mask gleams, little pinpricks of light from the city hitting his mask and making it sparkle. When the lights hit his eyes, my back stiffens at the slightly wild look that's turning them darker.

With unease swirling in my gut, lower my feet to the floor. I have to do this. Now.

"Never thought I'd say this, Zane, but I'm glad you're here." I stand, unzipping my little purse. My heart thunders against my chest.

Zane moves closer, and my hand drops. My foot slides back, my anima; brain screaming with alarm. That gleam in his eye makes my already quick heart rate shoot higher.

"What are you doing?" I ask, taking another step back. The need to put distance between us feels like feeling urgent enough to make my throat tighten.

The way his eyes dip to my chest tells me precisely what he's he's thinking.

"Are you glad I'm here so you can give me a sample?" He smirks, teeth flashing, reminding me of a hungry wolf.

Zane is a predator, eating up businesses and money. I didn't think he was one like Rune, though, not until right this second. But I see it now. The dangerous glint. The demon he tries to hide from everyone as his smile widens. He's not bothering to hide it now.

“Come on,” he says, stepping in closer. My back hits the window. “Lift that dress and show me.”

My stomach roils. I move to shove past him, but Zane grips my arm.

“Come on, Cora,” he snaps, dragging to him so his body is pressed to my side, his hard excitement digging into my hip, making my stomach lurch. “You’re going to have to give it up eventually. Like you do everyone else.”

“Fuck you,” I say, pushing him off and heading toward the door.

As I reach for the handle, my head snaps back by my hair so violently that I stumble backward, my hands reaching for his fist clutching the curls. Zane yanks me back so hard, I feel strands of my hair ripping from my scalp as I hit his chest.

“Be a good little fiancé,” Zane hisses, craning my head back. His masked face looms over me, mouth curled into a sneer. My insides twist as his free hand snakes up my belly, dipping under the fabric covering my breasts. Fingers dig into my flesh, groping me greedily. Bile rises in my throat, the feeling of his skin against mine a silent threat. I attempt to kick back, but he avoids my heel by widening his stance. My hands snake up his arms, nails digging into the flesh on the back of his hands, but he grips me tighter, ripping a cry from my throat, fear knocking the air from my lungs.

“Let me go,” I say, my voice wavering, “If you touch me, Clyde’s going to—“

His grip tightens. “What Cora? You’re my fucking *wife*.”

“I swear to god, Zane, if you don’t get your hands off me, I’ll tell everyone—“ My words get cut off because the door opens, and Rune steps in.

“Papa,” I say, the word rushing from me with relief, but it fades as he marches forward, stopping before me.

He doesn’t tell Zane to get his hands off me.

He doesn’t order Zane to let go of my hair.

His eyes land on my face. Flicker to Zane’s hand under my dress.

Anger makes him snarl, “Why do you constantly have to make things difficult?” Rune asks me. Fear skitters down my spine. A breath catches in my throat as Rune’s fingers dig into my cheeks, forcing me to look at him.

“My fiancé is not cooperating,” Zane says, hand moving further south, stretching the dress so he can brush his fingers over my panties. My

scream of disgust gets cut short, and he yanks my hair again. “You told me she’d fucking listen.”

“She will.” Rune grips my cheeks tighter. Meaner. Blue eyes, just like my Delly’s, moving to my mouth. There’s no kindness in the stark color like her. Just a thirst for power. Even if it’s over me. “On your knees.”

My heart stutters like my words. “Wh-what?”

“You know I don’t like repeating myself,” Runes hisses. “On your knees.”

His words slip over me like hot, black tar as the reality of what he’s asking sinks in. No, not asking. Rune doesn’t ask. He forces.

“Papa,” I whisper, my eyes burning. Is he seriously telling me to drop to my knees right here, at this party, with Zane in the room? “No.” I shove at his chest, trying to get him away from me, hurt and disbelief making me brave. “Fuck, no.”

The harsh graps on my cheeks leaves but then Rune grabs my throat, pulling me forward, glaring me at me with so much hatred, I don’t know how I ever fooled myself into believing he cared about me. Zane’s fingers’ in my hair grab and the pain of his tight grasp fades.

“Listen to me, girl.” He lets my throat go, using my shoulders to turn me to face Zane. “You took four dicks in that room in my club, I think you can handle one.”

Cut. That’s what he did. Rune just cut me off at the knees. I stand stock still, chin trembling, staring at Zane in front of me.

This isn’t happening.

“On your knees,” Runes says from behind me. “Get on your fucking knees and open your mouth.”

My mother was right. I am a stupid, stupid girl because this horrible pain tearing through my chest feels a lot like betrayal.

My teeth grate together, pain snarling up with rage. I step toward Zane, heart too broken to pound with fear. The slap to his face stuns him enough giving me time to say, “You’re so pathetically weak you can’t even force a woman to suck your dick without help,” before the sharp pain of his hand meeting my cheek has my head snapping to the side. I press my fingers to the stinging skin, my hair falling away as I turn my head back to look at Zane. I blink, sucking in air, but the shock of the intensity of his hit doesn’t leave.

Do you really think I’d let you go? You’re mine, Baby Girl.

My hands shake, but I can't seem to move because there's something simmering under my skin, making it feel too hot, making my limbs feel like they're on fire.

Rage, I'm boiling over with rage. Rage at everything they've done, and now I'm here, fighting for my fucking life and rights before men who refuse to acknowledge I'm human.

"I prefer my women cooperative," Zane says voice monotone. Emotionless. "And ones who know their place."

"Remind me again, where exactly that is?" I snarl before I can think.

This time, when his hand meets my cheek, my mask scrapes over my cheek as it's knocked off. I stumble back into Rune's chest, eyes watering, nose stinging with pain. Warmth hits my lip. I swipe under my nose, feeling the warm trickle of blood.

"For fucks sake, Cora," Rune snarls. He grips my dress and rips it over my shoulder, down my arm, revealing my breast to Zane.

All that rage, all that bravery, snags in my throat, growing cold at the reality of what's happening.

Rune is offering me up to Zane. It's one thing to steal my money. To steal my innocence and keep it for himself. But now he's offering my body to Zane to use and hurt like he does.

An anguished growl tears from me as I try to cover myself back up. The attempt is useless because Zane grips my arms and flings them aside, raising a hand to slap me again. I wince, letting him pull the other side of my dress open, over my shoulder and down my arms until I'm fully exposed.

"Good," Zane says. "See. I knew you were smart."

My anger solidifies. Turns hard. Until it's not anger anymore. It's just a mass of pain expanding, forcing air from my lungs. That pain presses on nerves, pinching them against bones and it's agony. Pure *agony*.

Reaper promised. He promised.

I refuse to believe everything I felt, everything they said and did was a lie.

It can't be.

The *clink* of metal on metal punches through my thoughts. Zane backs away, unbuckling his belt. The grating zipper as it slides down, feels like the teeth grate into my mind, ripping apart my soul and cutting away all

thoughts. The only thing I can process is the prominent outline of his dick in his pants. The reality of what he expects me to do.

Zane points to the gray carpet in front of him. “Knees.”

I shake my head.

Rune’s hand lands on my shoulder. A scream catches in that agony clawing at my throat. He presses down hard, making my shoulder dip.

I shake my head again.

No. This isn’t happening. Rune isn’t going to let this happen. He’s hurt me, forced me to my knees, but he’s still protected me in his fucked up way.

He still *loves* me in his fucked up way.

Rune pushes harder. The pressure on my shoulder makes tears flood my eyes. I press them closed, sinking to the floor, my knees hitting the carpet silently.

Shame heats my face. Sours my gut.

“Open your mouth,” Zane grates, and I feel hands in my hair.

Zane’s holding it back.

Rune’s holding me in place.

I gag when his dick hits my closed lips, the musky smell of cologne and Zane making me sick.

Another hard slap to my cheek opens the floodgates, and tears slip out. I gasp out a sob, my pride and anger so far gone, it doesn’t matter they know my devastation. I’m too humiliated. Too horrified.

Too sickeningly broken.

There’s part of me that wishes he’d hit me again. And again. Make me feel something other than this agonizing pain coursing through me. A hard slap to my face would hurt far less than this betrayal from the man who tucked me in bed at night. Who threw me parties. Who hurt me because he couldn’t contain his hatred for my mother. Couldn’t contain his need for revenge, even when it morphed into something dark and depraved, until I was something he hated enough to ruin but loved enough to protect.

Rune’s forced me, degraded me more times than I can count, but he’s never allowed someone else to do it.

He’s never *wanted* someone else to hurt me.

They’re going to come for me. Reaper promised. He’s seen my shattered pieces and said he wanted them anyway. He promised me that he wanted me.

Even if I’m broken. Even if I’m ruined.

Even if I’m nothing.

Another slap. “Tongue out.”

My shoulder’s wrack with a sob. I grip Rune’s hand in my hair, a silent plea to stop. I’ve been on my knees before four men, any of which could have humiliated me or hurt me, and never once did I feel this powerless. This disgusted with how female I am. How useless my rage feels. How pointless my pain.

He promised. He promised, I repeat in my head as the tears slip out. I just have to survive long enough. I’ve been through worse than this.

“What the fuck are you doing?” Clyde’s scream cuts through the room like broken glass. It jars Rune so much that his fingers twist tighter into my hair, and I’m jerked sideways. I land on hands and knees, looking over my shoulder.

A flash of metal and the click of the safety being unlocked.

I let out a strangled sob.

Zane’s chuckle makes my stomach twist as I scramble to my feet, moving behind Clyde, whose gun is trained on Zane’s face.

Rune growls out Clyde’s name. A warning. A command but he ignores him, eyes fixated on the demon before us.

“I swear to god,” Clyde says. “If you lay another finger on my little girl, I will shoot your fucking dick off, then shove it down your throat.”

“Dammit, Clyde,” Rune grates. “Lower your weapon.”

For a heartbeat, I think Zane might end up with a bullet through his head. Clyde’s hand twitches, but he removes his finger from the trigger and lowers the gun slowly, eyeing Zane, daring him to say or do anything to give him an excuse to shoot him.

Zane backs away, just as slow, tucking himself back into his pants.

Clyde wraps an arm around my shoulders, pulling me to his chest. I grip his suit, pressing my cheek to him, gasping for air as I sob. I adjust my dress with trembling hands, pulling it back over my shoulders.

“Who the fuck do you think—,” Rune starts, fury twisting his features into something far crueler than I’ve ever seen.

“Fuck you,” Clyde seethes, shooting a death glare at Rune. “This is too far, Rune. Too far even for you.”

He backs away enough to shrug out of his suit jacket and drags it over my shoulders, then bends and scoops me up, cradling me to his chest.

I keep my face tucked to his shoulder as stalks down the long hall, walking briskly past the large room where the party is still going. Clyde kicks the large double doors at the back open with his foot, and we burst into the warm night. The music and laughter fade as the door closes. He sets me down on the veranda and cups my cheeks.

“Cora,” he whispers, “Jesus. Cora, your nose is bleeding.”

A shiver moves through me. I raise my hands to look at them. They look small and useless. Weak. I’m weak. I couldn’t even fight them.

I didn’t fight. Because Rune trained me to accept what he did to me. I bury face in Clyde’s chest, clinging to him, hating that I didn’t even *fight*.

“Come on,” Clyde says, peeling me off him enough to grab my hand and pulls my little purse free. Fleetingly, I wonder how I’ve managed to hang on to it as Clyde tucks it in the inside pocket of his tux. His sharp tug propels me toward the large parking lot behind the museum.

My heels clack on the asphalt as we rush through the lot, rows and rows of cars gleaming in the bright white lights lining the lot overhead. We stop in the second row of parked cars, and Clyde takes his phone out, cursing as he unlocks the screen and makes a call, but the roar of an engine cuts off his words. I spin toward the sound, my eyes snagging on the sleek black motorcycle as it speeds toward us. Clyde grabs me again and tugs me forward, right in the path of the black bike.

“Is that—“ I ask, but I stop talking when I realize it is the same black bike I saw days ago outside the office building.

The rider skids the bike to a stop before us, the back tire slightly fishtailing with his abrupt stop. The rumbling engine echoes in my ears as I take in a breath, trying to make sense of the rider’s presence, but Clyde shoves me toward him. I take a step, my head swimming with questions.

Why is he here?

Who is he?

And why isn’t he wearing the same black jacket and pants? Instead, he’s wearing a black-on-black tux with a gold floral pin on the lapel.

The rider holds out his bare hand and my eyes drop from his black helmet reflecting the city lights to his outstretched hand.

I blink, taking in the long, strong fingers. The deep skin and perfect fingernails.

My chest constricts. Expands.

I know that hand. It’s the same hand that skimmed over my lips so sweetly. The hand that has been in my hair, between my legs. That’s caressed my broken parts affectionately.

A fresh sting of tears floods my eyes. I suck in air, and his name escapes on an exhale, all my fears, all the anguish, all my hope breaking free. “Breaker?”

That hand curls up, and he presses his pointer to the black helmet, telling me to hush.

Clyde shoves me forward again and says, “It’s about fucking time one of you showed up.”

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Chapter 24

Breaker

4 years ago, July, Age 24

YELLOW IS MY FAVORITE color. It's laughter and sunshine, open-faced hollyhocks and sunflowers bursting with life. Yellow is the color of joy and sun-flooded rooms.

It's the dress of the woman standing less than one hundred feet away as I watch her from my seat on the bench in the quickly darkening park. But, as much as I love the color yellow, I decide right now that it's not my favorite anymore.

It's red.

Like her hair.

I lean forward, resting my elbows on my knees as remove my aviators. It's a risk, but it's too late in the day to wear them, and since I'm currently watching for our target, I don't need to draw attention to myself

any more than I already am by sitting on a park bench by myself, staring at the tiny redhead.

She's so beautiful it makes my chest hurt. She's wearing a bright green hat sporting a bear with a shamrock on its stomach. The hat shadows her face, but it doesn't hide her features. Her fair skin is nearly flawless, with the exception of a sprinkle of freckles on her nose and cheeks and hair so red it blazes like molten lava in the fading sunlight.

The encrypted message came through just two hours ago. Extract and Hold. That's all Fallon sent us, along with the target's name and location. Of course, we already know who our target is. And we know why we're here. With so few people around, the only joggers or dog walkers, it will be easy to snag the target, and then slip out unnoticed.

Then we wait for further instructions.

A vice clamps around my chest. I breath out a shaky breath, ripping my eyes from the girl with red hair down to my hands, worry making my palms sweat. I'm never nervous during a mission, but fear of what Fallon will want me to do starts to eat at my gut. My skill isn't clean and precise like Striker's or quick and lethal like Viper's.

No. I crack things open, slowly, painfully, until I get what I need.

It doesn't matter that Rune brought this upon himself, the mere thought that Fallon may want to hurt a young woman as payback, makes my stomach twist grossly.

"Where's the other one?" Viper asks in my ear, his voice cracking with static through the earbud. "The target?"

I scan the area before fixing my gaze back on the beautiful girl before me. It's surprising there are so few people in the park. The city lights up the large park every year with hundreds of tiny fairy lights to celebrate the summer solstice. Maybe everyone had their fill a few weekends ago during the lighting ceremony and that's why there are so few here tonight.

"She's pulling up now," Striker says, and static pops noisily from the earbud fitted snuggling in my left ear. I turn my head, leaning back to rest my arm on the back of the bench and tap the earpiece to lower the volume. With a quick glance over to where Striker's positioned on the rooftop of a small bank near the park, I settle back in my seat, casting a look in Viper's direction, but I can't see him. "Coming in through the back exit, Viper. Watch your six."

"You hitting on me again, Strike?" Viper asks.

“Fuck off,” he says, but we can all hear his laughter. “Target is wearing…” His voice fades. “Fuck, man. I don’t know what that is. But that’s a hell of an outfit.”

“Black hair, right?” Viper says. “Any hats or other markers, Strike? I’m sitting on a fucking bench and can’t see shit.” Then his guttural groan snaps through the earpiece. “Holy shit.”

My head jerks in the direction of where he’s located. Viper and I are the ones Reaper said would extract the target, while he hung back, and Striker kept lookout.

“Hold tight,” Reaper growls in the earpiece. “Do not approach. Goddammit, Viper. Do not fucking engage.”

“Target is coming in from the…Jesus, fuck,” Striker growls. “You’ll see her. She’s got a guard escorting her to the—“

“Got her,” Reaper says, but his words sound slightly strangled.

From the corner of my eye, I finally see Viper, but my back straightens when I see he’s moving in the direction of the girl with fiery hair. Goddammit is right. Viper is hard *not* to notice.

Like me, he stands out in a crowd.

As much as I want to rush to him and shake him, tell him to go sit back down before he compromises our mission, I keep myself still and dare another glance toward the tiny woman with the green bear hat. She waves and I slowly look to the right and nearly choke on my tongue when I see a flash of pale pink.

Holy shit is right.

“That’s her?” I ask. “Gavin’s daughter?” I drop my hands to my thighs, gripping them as I watch her. She’s a sight to behold.

“That’s not an outfit. That is a pink nightie,” Viper says, and my gaze moves from the Gavin girl over the nearly empty sidewalk, looking for Viper. I still when I see him maybe only fifty feet from her, leaning against a light pole, thumbing through his phone. “It looks like those silky things women wear to bed when they want to fuck.”

Reaper says something unintelligible, then, “It’s a fucking dress, you idiot.”

Dress is being generous. If she bends over, which I’m kind of hoping she does, the entire park will see her panties.

I take a deep breath, telling myself not to be that guy, but I’m definitely that guy right now. So much so I hate myself a little. But that self-

loathing doesn't stop me from staring hard as Rune's daughter, trailed by her security guard, as she snakes down the paths and meets her best friend.

"*Dress,*" Viper says the word like it's offensive. "Dresses don't look like that."

"That one does," Striker says.

"Focus," Reaper snarls, "we have a mission."

"Mission." Viper laughs as he pushes off the light post and sinks onto a nearby bench that's entirely too close to our target. "This mission just got real interesting."

Through the open mic, I hear Reaper say, "We have the target in sight. We are awaiting orders."

Fallon's crackling response from the satellite radio comes through the earpiece. "*Extract*."

"Copy that." Reaper repeats the order over the earpiece.

"We heard," Striker says, "and Rodger that."

"Not a problem," Viper says, and Strike chuckles. "I'll gladly take this hot piece of ass with us and tie her up."

I don't realize I'm nodding in agreeance until I feel the bench dip from the weight of a massive man sitting next to me.

Dread coils like a snake in my gut, freezing my limbs in place.

"She's beautiful, isn't she?" he asks, leaning back and spreading his arm out on the bench behind me. He flashes a bright smile, but it doesn't meet his eyes.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck," Striker says in my ear, and his panicked alarm makes fear travel up my spine in little electric bursts.

I have one of two options.

Run like hell or face this problem.

I hold out my hand, offering it to the man wearing the three-piece suit. The gray hair around his temples stands out starkly against his dark skin. His deep brown eyes drop to my hand.

When he takes it, I say, "Nice to officially meet you, Mr. Harlow."

He gives my hand a firm shake.

"What the fuck are you doing, Break," I hear Reaper snarl in my earpiece just as Striker says, "Get the fuck out, now."

Viper's gritted out, "Jesus fucking Christ," makes my skin prick, but I avoid looking in his direction. If I see him, how he's probably marching toward me right now, it's just going to make me panic even more.

“Are you all here?” Harlow asks, crossing his arms now, eyes darting over to Viper, who’s—I was right—stalking this way, with his shoulders bunched, the two women forgotten.

I shake my head, but Viper doesn’t slow down. Instead, he plops down on the bench next to Harlow and adjusts his hat as he leans forward, resting his forearms on his knees.

Harlow glances his way and cocks a brow but returns his gaze to me. “I’ll take that as a yes.”

Harlow settles himself back onto the bench. His thigh touches mine, his other Viper’s, and I resist the urge to draw my knife and stab it through his leg.

He killed Hunter.

He tore my brother apart, and unless we can slip out before Rune’s soldiers are notified, we may end up in pieces, too.

Now I’m panicking even more, utter chaos swirling in my head, my eyes darting from one end of the park to the other, searching for the enemy. Rune’s about to get two more of us.

“*God-fucking-dammit*,“ Reaper shouts in the earpiece. “Tell him he has our attention.”

I blow out a breath. “We’re here.”

“Good.” Harlow nods in the girl’s direction, watching the Julian girl and Gavin’s daughter link arms and walk toward the large fountain at the center. “Since you’re all here, we can have a conversation.”

“Fuck we can,” Viper growls but stays still.

“I see you’ve taken an interest in Delilah and Cora.” Harlow smiles. “Not that I blame you. They are lovely girls.” His smile drops. “But they are just that. Girls.”

I wait, knowing he has more to say. Viper shifts, but I give a subtle shake of my head. I may want to stab Clyde Harlow in the middle of this park, but I won’t.

Viper will.

Harlow keeps his focus on the two women. “Innocent.”

“Like our brother was,” I say.

“Pawns,” Harlow says, nodding. “Though your brother was hardly innocent, but he didn’t deserve what Rune did to him.

I gesture to Delilah and Cora across the park. “Her security detail is garbage, by the way.”

From what we gathered when we researched her last week, her bodyguard isn't new. Rune Gavin keeps a tight leash on his daughter after what he did. She's rarely ever alone or even out in public.

He must know what's coming.

"You may want to tighten up security." My smile is poisonous. "Pawns may be innocent, but they're the perfect pieces for revenge."

Harlow takes a deep breath, then lets out a humorless chuckle. "Can Fallon hear what I'm saying?"

I nod. Fallon can't, but Reaper can.

"Good," he says, relaxing into the seat and spreading his legs out, wider. "I have a deal for him."

"Fuck you and your fucking deals," Viper snaps, but I hold up a hand before he can say more.

"Go on," I tell Harlow, giving Viper a warning glare.

He reaches into his suit pocket and pulls out a white envelope, dropping it on my lap. "You are well acquainted with what Rune is capable of doing."

I stare down at the envelope, scared to open it for what I may find inside. Viper leans across Harlow and snatches it up, removing the contents. He goes still, his eyes snapping to me.

"What the fuck is this?" he asks, eyes flaring wide. "Is this…?" Viper's voice trails off, and he leans back in the seat, adjusting his baseball cap, the images hanging loosely from his hand.

It's nearly dark now, and the lights around the park flicker on. Hundreds of tiny bulbs, blink to life like fireflies, and then the entire park is flooded with a silvery glow.

Someone nearby laughs.

Harlow points to the pictures in Viper's hand. "Evidence. I have more."

"What does that mean?" I ask. "More evidence?" but even as the question leaves my mouth, I already know.

Harlow is right. We are well acquainted with Rune's activities.

"He didn't stop," Harlow says. "After that first time." He meets my eyes. "But you already knew that, didn't you? That's why you came for him last year."

I nod slightly.

"And he got a hold of one of you in the process."

Striker mumbles something in my ear, and I glance at Viper. His head hangs, one hand adjusting his baseball cap, the other rubbing at his chest.

We failed that day, and Hunter paid the price.

“It was Zane Devin,” Harlow says. “He knew your plans. That’s how Rune was able to ambush you.”

“Fucking Zane,” Viper grates. “How did he know?”

Harlow lifts a large shoulder.

“Why are you coming to us?” I ask.

“I had kept my mouth shut, never said a word after that first time. I think I was too shocked, and I was angry too. But Rune didn’t stop.” He picks up the images from Viper’s lap and I’m surprised Viper doesn’t shove him away.

I take the pictures, and when my eyes land on the top one, bile burns my throat, memories flooding back brutally. A sweat breaks out on my lower back, that old trembling fear that I had felt hitting me square in the chest. I tap the image on my knee. Once. Twice. Two more times.

“He just kept doing it,” Harlow tells me. “Every year. Then he found people like him—people who wanted to do that.” He points to the pictures. “And I kept my mouth shut so I didn’t become one of the people in those pictures.”

I suck in air, stuffing the images in the envelope, then folding it in half and leaning forward enough to shove it in the back pocket of my jeans. “Why now?” I ask. “After all this time, why now? Why not come to Fallon when he started?”

Harlow lets out a strangled chuckle. “Because he’s as much to blame as Rune.”

Viper’s eyes meet mine.

Harlow gestures before us. “And to protect them.”

I follow his lifted hand to the girls, laughing and dancing under the canopy of lights.

“They are why I’ve been silent. I will do anything to keep these girls safe,” Clyde Harlow says. “Rune needs to be stopped. But I need your help.”

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Chapter 25

Breaker

LIES ARE LIKE SEEDS. Once planted, they take root and sprout from the earth, fresh and vulnerable. If left untouched and unquestioned, they grow sturdy, stronger, and more believable. If anyone dares question their credibility, one can simply pluck a leaf as evidence of the truth.

That's how the Snyder Group was born. Years ago, Reaper planted a seed. The lies grew. We nurtured them, subtly dropping hints at small events hosted by those in Rune's circle. We let small bits of information slip. Like we may or may not buy and sell more than property.

Years ago, we formed the corporation as a cover to purchase real estate around the country. When we formed the plan to take Delilah, we strategically purchased properties solely to get Rune's attention. When we began buying up hotels in his territory, Rune took notice and quickly made an offer on our latest chain. This new group, Snyder Inc., was stepping on his toes a little. Of course, we sold it all to him, just as we planned. We barely had the chain for a month before his lawyers called us.

On the outside, we're the Snyder Group, just another set of businessmen much like Rune, buying up property, rubbing elbows with politicians, and doing shady shit on the side.

I'm the main face of the company, the elusive billionaire playboy who inherited money from his father, started Snyder Inc. to flip properties and knows nothing about running it. I'm so bad at it that I have my business reps handle all the details, and I just sign papers. But I'm too busy

gallivanting around the world to be bothered with details, so I never set foot in an office.

It's all bullshit, but it's a great story, and people love a handsome bachelor with too much money and no time for anything other than sex and parties.

The funny thing is that no one questions it. They love the lies we tell, eating up the scraps, wanting to be near Ben and his money. It helps I don't dispel the rumors that I inherited my money from my weapons dealer father when he supposedly passed. He was just as elusive as me, buying and selling to anyone, anywhere, and no one ever saw his face.

It worked to our advantage that no one knew it was Fallon behind the scenes for over a decade, selling weapons when we needed to explain the money Ben inherited. Not even Rune knew Fallon was dealing firearms on the side. Fallon had a brilliant cover, helping fund the school while he trained his future soldiers.

Everyone in Rune's inner circle is oblivious to the truth. Many of them had helped the elusive arms dealer either purchase weapons over the years or sell them off. Then again, people look the other way when they have their own secrets to hide. Like Rune.

He loves doing business with Snyder Inc. He especially loves that I am so incompetent at handling financial matters that I simply sign whatever documents are placed in front of me. Rune may have paid millions, but he got a great deal on the shipment of weapons pending arrival at his lodge. Of course, I was too busy to come in and sign papers the day the sale finalized, so I just video-called Delilah and did it all digitally.

Busy getting ready for the night we had planned with them.

She was so mad that day. All spitfire and rudeness. She didn't even bother to hide it. She's not as good at pretending as I am. And I'm nowhere near as talented as the people in this room, smiling and laughing, donating hundreds of thousands to charity, pretending they don't gather one, sometimes twice a year, for a truly heinous act.

Act's I'm too familiar with.

There have been many times in my life when I wish I were different. That Fallon never took me, that I never had Nanny and our sunny kitchen, that I never went to the school and learned how cruel and hard life truly is.

But today, I am grateful for every moment and every dark memory. For the heartbreak I endured leaving Nanny. The humiliation of the girl in

the village.

The day I earned my name.

Because if I hadn't lived exactly as I did, endured every lashing from Fallon, the blue room, the pain of growing up to be Fallon's soldier, I'd not be here, right now, standing in a room full of my enemies, watching the woman I've adored for the last four years.

I have seen little of her since that day outside the office building, but now she's right before me, walking arm and arm with fucking Zane.

I grind my teeth, as I struggle to keep myself in check. My hands ball into tight fists at my sides, fingers itching to rip Zane's greedy hands off our Little Red and punch him in his fucking face, shoving all this pent up rage onto him. Break his fingers one by one. Unleash an entire magazine into his skull.

Then reload and do it again.

My blood simmers at seeing Zane's gaze devour her whole. Cora's long-sleeved, red dress plunges to her navel, her breasts peeking out temptingly. The back drapes even lower, revealing those little dimples above her ass that I'd fantasized about for so long. I finally got to touch them that night in the club, and I've been craving her ever since.

My back straightens when I see Cora jerk her arm from Zane's grasp, causing the dress to shift, the two long slits on either side revealing her thighs. His gaze dips to her legs, and I think I may have a brain aneurysm from the restraint it's taking not to stalk across the room and kill him.

Loud, vicarious laughter off to my right snags my attention, and I glance over to find Dave Sobian, Delilah's ex-husband, with a group of women.

Fucking prick that guy is.

He turns my way and raises his glass. I lift mine back in greeting. The remnants of two black eyes color the space under his mask green, and I smile inwardly. Rune must have beaten the shit out of him after we took the girls, looking for answers. Satisfaction curls up my spine. Dave cheated on our girl, and he deserves everything that's coming to him. Rune has surrounded himself with evil monsters who feed off cruelty, Dave being one of them.

I fit right in.

Rune's somewhere in the crowd, and the thought alone makes my stomach churn. It doesn't matter that I'm in a crowded room, I'm *feel* alone

knowing Rune is in this gallery. I'm a fool for thinking I could do this alone. Striker and Viper were always by my side before. Now I'm in a room full of our enemies and I'm barely able to breathe under this suffocating mask because of the number of people in this room who'd flay me alive if they knew my true identity.

Fallon's son. The man who helped orchestrate the kidnapping of Rune Gavin's daughter and his adopted daughter, all while pretending to be a billionaire.

Well, that part I'm not exactly pretending.

A firm clap on my back startles me from my thoughts, forcing my focus away from Dave and the group of women to Zane, who's suddenly standing beside me.

I've never in my life been more grateful for a fucking mask.

Panic and anger collide in my chest, making my heart rattle in my ribcage.

"Benjamin-fucking-Snyder." A lopsided grin forms on Zane's face, hazel eyes sparking. "I can't believe you're actually here."

My eyes drop to his outstretched hand as I breathe in deeply, trying to tamp down the violence brewing in my chest. I blink, focusing on his fingers, the manicured nails, the fair skin of his palm. There's a fleeting thought that there should still be blood on his hands from all his crimes.

He helped kill my brother.

And nearly killed me.

I'm an idiot. There's no way I can do this alone.

Zane's gaze drops from the black material covering my eyes to my mouth, the only part of my face he can see. I force a smile and grip his hand. Hard. "Glad to be here."

His lips purse ever so slightly as I tighten my grip. I release his hand, my fingers tingling, like his evil is slowly seeping into my pores, infecting me. The urge to wipe them on my pants is so strong that I switch my glass from one hand to the other, allowing my fingers to trail in the condensation. The cool wetness eases the growing knot in my chest, but it's still there. I tap my pinky ring on the glass, drawing his eyes.

"I heard you made quite the donation to the cause," Zane says. Thanks to the black mesh covering my eyes, he can't see them, though I can't hide forever.

I nod, maintaining a smile. “I did,” I say, amazed that my voice comes out normal, not strangled by the tight panic gumming up my throat.

“Good man.” Zane claps on my shoulder. His eyes are a little glassy behind his green mask, telling me he’s tipsy. “Art is crucial. We must ensure it remains in schools and that our children receive a well-rounded education.”

Asshole. He knows nothing about kids or schools.

“But I’m glad you’re here,” Zane says. “Clyde tells me you are interested in our offer.”

“Indeed,” I say, my stomach roiling.

The offer to join Rune’s private lodge. All because we sold a container of weapons and ammo to Rune for his yearly hunts, along with our hotel chain.

Weapons—an entire fucking armory—are just sitting waiting for us at the lodge.

For her.

“I can’t wait,” Zane says. “You’re going to love it. The adrenaline is practically orgasmic. The smells, the sounds. There’s nothing like it.”

Oh, I know.

“I’m familiar with the hunt,” I say. “There’s nothing like tracking your prey. Locking in on it. Getting that perfect shot that takes them down.”

His twisted grin sends a chill down my spine. Little does he know, I am no stranger to stalking my victims. Luring them in, gaining their trust, and devouring all the information they spill, unaware of my true intentions, until it’s too late.

Like him right now.

When Zane claps my back again, I contemplate breaking his fingers one by one to remove them from me. Stepping away from his repulsive touch, my eyes scan for an escape route, desperate to get away before I lose control. That’s when I spot the grand piano in the corner of the room.

“We have a special event planned for this next hunt,” he says, leaning forward like he’s trying to peer through the fabric covering my eyes. “Once we go over the terms of your membership, we can discuss the rest.”

In certain circles, rumors of Rune’s lodge run rampant. He never confirms or denies them for good reason. It’s an invitation-only club, reserved for those who have earned trust from his inner circle. We’ve

meticulously planned this for years. Every step calculated, every detail gone over multiple times.

And now it's time to see if it's actually going to work.

"Rune should be around here somewhere," Zane says, scanning the room. "He'll want to talk with you."

Panic rushes through me, making sweat bead on my brow. I may be good at pretending, but even I have my limits.

Like standing face to face with the man who tore our brother apart.

That familiar tightness in my chest returns, unease needling at my fingers. My ring taps at my glass. I glance around some more, grateful Zane can't see my face or how my gaze darts all over, continuing to look for an escape as a nervous tension grips my every thought, snagging it on the dread bubbling in my chest.

I'm not supposed to be here. Alone. We had a plan, and it got fucked the second we took Cora and were forced to return her. It got really fucked when I set things into motion. Way too soon.

If I mess this up, Rune will slip through our fingers, and we're all dead.

I have to do this right, so he never sees us coming.

Now it's my turn to be a dick. I give Zane an overly enthusiastic pat on the back, causing him to stumble forward a little. I point to the pretty woman standing next to the piano. "She looks a little lonely."

I toss him a smile as I walk away, relieved he's not following me. Trying not to be obvious, I glance around but don't see Cora anywhere. Maybe she went home. She and Delilah rarely stayed long at these types of functions.

As I walk, Dave tries to flag me down, probably wondering if I'll show up at his late-night party that he invited Ben to earlier today. I'd rather cut off my hand than attend that mess. When I reach the piano and the woman next to it, I slip past her and take a seat.

My fingers land on the ivory keys, and memories slam into me. Fallon behind me, patiently teaching me how to read sheet music. The sharp sting of a wooden ruler against my knuckles when I made a mistake. His soft words of encouragement and gentle squeeze on my shoulder when I successfully played an entire song without messing up.

He wanted me to be just like him. We have the same eyes, the same number of fingers, and the same capacity for violence.

As my fingers glide over keys, I sink into the music, pouring myself into each note, my heart light at first, growing heavier as the music hits the crescendo. By the time I release the last key, the last note still ringing in the air, I blink back from that blank space my mind escapes to when I play.

I stand to take my bow, and applause echoes through the room. My gaze sweeps across the sea of faces, searching for her. Stepping back into the crowd, I shake hands, my skin burning from each touch, my chest knotting from the number of people touching my skin who would kill me in a heartbeat if they knew who I was.

“I hear you may join us at Rune’s lodge this year,” a voice says from next to me. I turn and find myself face-to-face with Don Zimmer and his wife.

Again, I’ve never been so grateful for a mask.

I take his outstretched hand, wishing I was wearing gloves so his evil couldn’t touch me the way it has touched others. I’ve seen what this man is capable of. He makes me look tame.

“Possibly,” I say, trying not to rip my grasp from his enthusiastic hand pumping.

Tap, tap, tap. My pinky finger hits my thigh.

When he finally lets my hand go, I shove it in my pocket, gathering it in a fist.

Don leans in to whisper, “I heard he’s planned a special event this year. A celebration of sorts.”

“So I’ve been told,” I say, still searching the room for our Little Red. “I’m looking forward to it.”

Anxiety tingles at the back of my neck, making my skin prick. I’m not sure if it’s from being surrounded by so many poisonous smiles, or that fact I can’t find her, but my chest feels so tight, clawing with unease, I’m about to burst open.

I don’t see her, or Zane, or Rune.

Where the fuck is Harlow?

“If you’ll excuse me.” With a practiced smile, I step onto the balcony, but it’s empty except for a few stragglers. It’s getting late and I’m beginning to think they’ve all left when I spot Harlow coming out of the restroom.

I pull my phone from my pocket and shoot him a text.

A second later, Harlow takes out his own phone and reads my message. His eyes find mine, and I see the panic contorting his features from here.

Harlow lifts his chin toward the exit. I read his meaning clearly and subtly nod back at him before he darts down the hall to his left.

Fuck.

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Chapter 26

Cora

THE WIND WHIPS MY hair around my face as I press my cheek against his back, swallowing down the sobs that threaten to escape. With one hand clutching my long dress and the other wrapped tightly around his waist, I cling to him for dear life.

The city flies by in a blur of brilliant, shimmering colors, rumbling noise, and invasive scents as we speed down the streets. But I hardly see it, barely hear it. I only faintly taste the metallic hint of rain moving in, catch the scent of oil and exhaust, glimpse the black night against bright streaks of light, feel the vibrating engine of the bike beneath me.

Breaker slows as we approach a streetlight. The bike tilts slightly to the side as he leans on one leg. He squeezes my hand that's gripping his waist.

The tears start again.

He came.

Reaper promised, they promised, but Breaker came for me.

I want to fling my arms around his neck and bury my face in his warmth. Scream and wail with relief. I want to get off this bike and ask all the questions, burning a hole through my mind.

But then he squeezes my hand again and we're moving once more. We weave through cars and make turns without slowing down. It feels like we ride for hours, though I know it's not that long, until we reach the outskirts of town. The neon-lit sidewalks give way to dark alleys and

shabby buildings. High-end boutiques are replaced by Dollar General's and liquor stores. Modern high-rises are now towering overpasses, all set against the sparkling downtown skyline in the distance.

We slow down and I tighten my legs around his hips. I lift my head from his back to take in the sight of rundown trailer parks, then empty parking lots like barren concrete fields, and large abandoned buildings with boarded-up windows.

Breaker pulls up to a tall, chain-link fence topped with barbed wire, reminding me of a prison. The gate retracts with scratching metallic sounds. The engine roars to life. He steers the bike into the empty lot and drives us toward a large metal sliding bay door of a massive old factory. Several yards behind it sits another gigantic building.

I'm not hiding my face now. I'm looking at everything. Drinking in every detail and soaking up the sights around me. I've never seen this part of the city. I've only ever been surrounded by luxurious things. Soft leather and fine foods. The ugliness in my life came from the people.

The rattling metal door slides up and slams to a stop. Breaker slowly drives the bike inside. Once we park, he taps my arm, and I release him. He slides off the bike facing me and grips my waist, helping me off next. I lift my face toward his, brushing my damp cheeks and the remnants of tears away from my face. He unclips his helmet under his chin and removes it, revealing a black balaclava with one large eye hole, giving me a clear view of his bright blue eyes and dark brows.

I release my dress, and it falls around my ankles. He kicks the kickstand into place and releases the bike.

"What did he do?" Breaker grates, gently setting the helmet on the bike seat like it's made of glass. Like he's trying not to break it, or everything around him.

His thumb skates under my nose. Winter eyes take in my torn dress, my trembling hands. My chin wobbles. I bite my lip to make it stop.

"Little Red," he whispers, finger gently squeezing my hip. "Did he hurt you?"

I shake my head, but it's more to clear the images of Zane from my mind, the feeling of Rune's hands on me in ways that felt even more vile than before, and to rid myself this stupid feeling of betrayal.

"Where are we?" I ask, taking a deep breath. "Where's Delly? Is she okay? Is she with them?"

“She’s still back home,” Breaker tells me.

Home.

“I couldn’t exactly take you to the hotel room,” he says.

“Hotel?” The word tastes foreign. Like I don’t know what a hotel is as I search his ice-blue eyes, trying to sort through the last hour in my mind, but there’s this dull humming noise in my head. I’m aware I’m in shock, completely numb, unable to process much.

“I’m sorry,” he starts, but I cut him off by holding up my hand.

“I know you didn’t have a choice. Your father is terrifying,” I say. “I understand why you sent me back. He just didn’t have to be so dramatic about it.”

Breaker makes a sound in his throat as he slips off his tux jacket, flinging it behind him. I move forward, unsure what I want or need, when I notice where we are.

The massive open space holds what look like the living room, dining room, and garage all in one room. Behind me, several more bikes sit lined up by the bay door. A massive sectional rests nearly center of the room with a large TV hung on one wall. There’s a pool table, a table with chairs, and two doors with faded restroom signs hung loosely underneath the metal stairs leading up to the second-floor catwalk.

The loud click of a breaker cuts through the space. Dull lights from under the catwalk flood the room. I spin, looking up at the second-floor landing circling the warehouse and then up to the metal ceiling several stories above. There are no windows, and the walls are all flat black. Several metal pillars support the roof, each one wrapped with Christmas lights, giving the entire open floor a blue glow.

“You live here?” I ask, turning slowly to take it all in. I glance at him as he scratches at his balaclava before continuing toward the sofa and the TV. “All of you? For how long?”

Questions pile up as I walk, my heels clicking noisily, echoing in the large space. It is obviously an old factory, gutted and converted into a livable space. I run my hands over the leather sofa and the bookcases holding old books and games, noting the video game consoles and the coffee table with rings staining the dark wood.

“Four years,” Breaker says behind me.

His deep voice startles me, already forgetting I had asked a question. I turn to face him. My breath *whooshes* from my lungs almost violently.

For a minute, probably longer, I just stare at him. His piercing clear blue eyes. His dark brows that are both masculine and feminine.

“You took your mask off,” I say dumbly.

Breaker looks down at his hand holding the balaclava, then nods. A quick up-down jerk of his head. He meets my eyes. “I did.”

My heart flutters at the meaning behind his words. His actions. My legs grow weak, and I think I may crumble to the floor.

I was starting to doubt them. Beginning to doubt Reaper’s promises. Starting to think I was a damn fool for believing these men that I hardly know. Men who have committed horrible crimes. Men who saved me, sent me away, then came to rescue me from the fate Rune bestowed upon me.

Rune. The man responsible for all this.

But they promised, and here he is. Breaker, standing before me, gloriously beautiful, and I don’t know what to do or say. I suddenly feel awkward. Seeing his face means he’s a person. Not some superhuman, almost bad guy who kidnapped me. Not the masked face who fucked me with so much passion, the memory is burned into my flesh.

He’s just a man.

One I know nothing about.

“I told Delilah I’d keep you safe,” Breaker says, his voice cracking through the chaotic storm of thoughts in my head.

I keep my eyes locked on his mouth. The full lips. The delicate heart peaks somehow both elegant and too harsh. My gaze slips to his jaw, square and cut sharply, smoothly shaven, then down to the thick column of his neck. I’ve seen his neck and jawline and felt his lips, but they all look so different when I can see the rest of him.

He’s young. Close to my age, I think.

Every feature is perfectly symmetrical and stoic yet carrying that slightly too clean look that only younger men have. With high cheekbones and such smooth skin, he looks like he could be carved from marble. His long, sculpted nose, with a slight upturn, shadowing his perfect sultry mouth.

Striker has a slight harshness to his softness, while Breaker looks almost angelic in his perfection. Like he should be stalking down a runway, or singing in a choir, not standing before me.

My first instinct is to touch his cheek, then slide my hand around the back of his neck, and force his lips to mine, but I dumbly say, “You’re

bald.”

The corner of his mouth lifts, and he slides a hand over his scalp like he’s reassuring himself that his head is, in fact, shaved clean. “Yes.”

I take in air, still struggling with placing him with the soldier who made me sandwiches back at the mansion, who gave me his coat because I was cold, alongside the man who held a gun to people’s faces so he could kidnap us, with the man at the party wearing the perfect tux and lion mask.

To Breaker. The man right before me who looks just as out of sorts as I feel.

Wait.

“You’re Snyder,” I say, stepping back as if putting distance between us will ease my shock. “You’re the asshole Snyder guy.”

Those eyes seem to brighten. Lips quirk into a grin. “I am.”

My laugh cuts through the room, echoing back at me. “You just took Rune for millions.”

That grin curls into a mischievous smile. “Actually, we let him *have* the chain of hotels with only a small profit.”

“But why?”

“To get closer to him,” Breaker says. “Rune’s love language is money. He craves it.”

“He craves a lot of things,” I say. “Including power.”

“And what better way to get close to him than to give him what he wants?”

“What did you give him?” I ask. I know they sold him something more than that chain of hotels. The sum was too large.

“Weapons.”

Out of all the things I imagined, that never once crossed my mind. I rub my temple, the sign of a headache making it harder and harder to think. “Why would you sell your enemy weapons? That makes zero sense.”

“It makes perfect sense,” Breaker says. “We needed to gain his trust. We let loose a few rumors that Snyder Inc. deals in arms. Military grade. Things you can’t even find on the black market.”

“But why?” I rifle through what I know. He didn’t make a sale of any kind after the Snyder deal. He’s not even trying to set one up. So, he can’t be reselling them.

“The yearly hunts.”

“His boys’ club?” I shake my head, trying to piece this all together. “He’s not out taking down elephants at the lodge. Why would Rune need military-grade weapons?”

He shoves his hands in his pockets. “Are you hungry?”

“What?” I look around like I’ll suddenly spot a gourmet kitchen in this converted factory, my head spinning from this conversation and sudden change in direction. From the entire night.

“Nanny always said food makes bellies happy, and happiness makes people smile.” Breaker removes his hands from his pocket, rubbing his fingers over his mouth, like he wishes he could put the words back. Winter blue eyes move up to the ceiling and then drop back to me.

My laugh surprises us both.

“Who’s Nanny?” I ask.

His perfect brows knit, like he’s debating his answer. “She was like my mother.”

Okay.

With a deep breath, I squeeze my eyes closed, gripping my dress to stop myself from spinning out of control. My mind quickly sorts through all the things I’ve learned and overheard. They were given names; they are brothers of sorts and received military training in a school. The men have a man they call their father. They are also very much not brothers in the familial sense, but in a bonded way. Viper had a name before he was Viper. Striker had a mother who passed away from an overdose. Breaker had a nanny.

“You never answered me,” he says.

my eyes open, the circling thoughts snapping to him and only him.

“Which part?” I ask. “Am I hungry, or did they touch me?”

Those plush, perfectly sculpted lips thin into a hard line, eyes darting to my nose. I swipe at it again, looking at my fingers for signs of blood, but they come away clean. Touching the bridge, I press around, hoping it doesn’t bruise, as I watch him, watch me. I know what he’s not asking. Rune and Zane certainly touched, but neither man was successful in everything else they planned.

“Neither,” I tell him. “And you never answered me.”

“I believe I did, Little Red,” Breaker says, stepping toward me and gripping my hand.

Holy shit, he’s gorgeous.

My cheeks puff as I exhale. “You evaded my question by derailing the conversation, Breaker. Why does Rune need weapons for the hunts?”

He raises my hand to his lips, kissing the back of my fingers.

“Come upstairs, and I’ll show you.”

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Chapter 27

Breaker

MY HEART RACES AS I lead her up the stairs to the third floor. Nervousness grips me, a feeling I haven't experienced since the day I sat in the park, my enemy at my side, and we agreed to help Harlow take down Rune.

We reach the top floor, and she pauses, surveying the room. I step back, letting go of her hand and giving her space as I attempt to see it from her perspective.

The loft area sits at the back of the factory, with massive windows offering a view of downtown. The only furniture is a long wooden table holding my equipment, metal folding chairs tucked around it. Along one wall hangs weapons, more gear, and monitors. *All* of them.

Cora leans forward, removing her heels and holds them in one hand, as she takes a tentative step forward, her eyes glued to the screens.

She lifts the hand holding her heels, gesturing at the wall. "That's the outside of my condo." She points to another screen. "And that's Delly's."

"Yes," I say and point to another screen. "And that's Rune's house and the offices."

Each screen contains several livestreaming footage of their homes and the office building from various angles. I turned them back on when I arrived, using them to help me track Cora's movements.

"You couldn't get inside?" she asks.

Her question catches me off guard. “Rune has weekly security sweeps looking for any devices.”

“He’s paranoid.” She takes another step into the room, her eyes focused on the monitors. “It got worse about five years ago,” she adds, glancing at me. “I assume when he killed your brother?”

Fucking Viper. I wonder what else he told her.

“It seems like he had good reason to be paranoid,” Cora remarks as she moves further into the room. My stomach tightens with anticipation. Any minute now, she’s going to see…

Her heels drop to the floor. The noise clatters through the loft, and I wait for her to show signs of…

Something. Anything.

“I’m not sure if I should be flattered or horrified,” Cora says, staring at the wall covered in pictures and lists.

“We needed intel,” I explain. “We monitored both of you.”

“You mean you needed information on Delly.” Her tone suggests we just cared about Delilah. That we only included her because she was close to our target.

How wrong she is.

We didn’t need to follow Cora. To spend years discovering her favorite movies and what shampoo she used. We did because we had to know every detail about the two women we secretly desired.

Cora’s brows furrow as she moves closer to look at the images we took of them over the years. Pictures cover every inch of the wall. There are snapshots of the two walking in the park, at the beach, sneaking into a taxi to go to Rune’s club the night we met them for the first time face to face. They did that often, taking a taxi instead of the driver Rune provided, so he couldn’t track their movements.

We did, though.

We always did.

“How long has Clyde been involved in gathering information for you?” she asks, and I note that she doesn’t say stalking, much to my relief. Because that’s what we did. We tracked and stalked our prey, learning their every move and every desire until they were so ingrained in us we could predict what they would do.

And then it was time.

The night Cora finally convinced Delilah to leave her house after months of depression, we knew she'd be ready to break free. Fallon trained us well. He's a master manipulator and a liar—and we are now, too. Reaper is terrifying in his ability to cut off emotions and act, though I've never seen him as passionate as he is with our girls.

"Four years," I tell her, keeping my distance as I watch her. She's absorbing everything, but barely reacting, and I can honestly say that's not what I expected, though it is concerning.

That's the thing with people, though. You can predict their actions, but you can never predict their emotions.

Cora's stoney facade makes me worry she's lying about being harmed, far more than the obvious hit to her face. She's displaying clear signs of dissociation. She's barely even here, and it's tainting my every thought with red rage. Striker does the same thing, sort of floats away and gets lost when things are too much. Reaper notices more than the rest of us. Then again, he pays more attention.

"Why?" Cora leans in to examine a picture. My heart skips when she nears the image I've been dreading her seeing, but she gets distracted and moves to another one of her and Delilah in the park after the summer solstice lighting. The night we first saw them. "What information is Clyde feeding you and why?"

"Rune's activity. And ways to get close to him."

Her brows knit, teeth nibbling at her bottom lip, trying to understand. "What did Rune do that Clyde would betray him? He's been with Rune forever. They've been friends for years."

I take a minute to answer, deciding how much to tell her. "Rune crossed a line when he killed our brother. One even Harlow won't step over," I say, waiting for her to say something. When she just continues to stare at the wall, I continue, "What Rune did to our brother went far beyond seeking justice. It would make your stomach turn, Little Red. Rune's cruelty knows no bounds."

"Will you tell me?" she says but shakes her head when she sees my frown. "Not about your brother, but about the rest. Who you are. The connection. Why Rune? I need to understand."

I look up at the metal ceiling, knowing I owe her this.

Cora deserves the truth.

I tell her most of it. A condensed version. I tell her some about the school and how Fallon trained us to be soldiers to use for his financial gain. The bits I explain about the wilderness only detail how Father used the land around Rune's lodge. How he and Rune were old friends, but even that I skim over. When I tell her about Rune killing Hunter after he captured him five years ago, she scowls, interrupting me.

"Why were you storming his lodge?" she asks. "What did he do that you were going to kill him?"

Delilah's face flashes in my mind. Cora can't know. I can't tell her. Not yet. Our Tiny Thing, my brave, strong girl, she'd be so angry with me if I told Cora before she could. I know she wants to be with her when Cora finds out, so I lie.

It feels like shit. Every word like a hot coal burning my tongue as I say, "An old deal gone wrong."

She nods, accepting this because that's how much faith they've put in us. That's how much she's trusting me, us, right this second.

"Let me get this straight. You're Snyder," she says, eyes slightly dazed. "You're….

"Ben Snyder," I say. "The face of Snyder Incorporated."

"Okay." A deep beath. "And you plan to gain Runes' trust to get into his lodge. So you're selling him weapons." Cora pulls at her bottom lip, thinking, then says, "Is he having large game shipped in? Like, is he hosting illegal game hunts?"

My gut lurches, uncomfortable memories assaulting me. "You could say that."

When it's time, and we can finally tell her the truth, I wonder if our Little Red will remember this moment and accuse me of lying like Delilah did.

She doesn't respond and just stares numbly at the wall of pictures. Between whatever happened tonight and what I just told her, I worry I may have sent her over the edge. It's killing me not knowing what happened. Everything in me wants to force her to talk, tell me so I can figure out a way to prevent it from happening again. But it's obvious she isn't, so I must accept that she'll tell me when she wants to.

If she wants to.

Still, it eats at me. Harlow's angry, mortified expression tells me it was bad, and I keep picturing Zane or Rune forcing her to do vile things,

but I have to shove it away because that tightness clenches my lungs. That dark, slinking feeling gathers in my chest, and I worry it will break free, and there will be no stopping me from killing them both.

I'd be doing the world a favor, but then the hunts would just continue. And we'll never get what we need. What Reaper needs.

I have to wait.

We have to wait for Delilah to be ready for any of this to work.

Cora glances around, exhaustion etched into every line of her face. "I'm tired."

My exhale is one of pure exasperation. Of course, she's tired. She must be exhausted. In every way possible. She's been trying to survive the devil.

I've never felt so ill-equipped to handle a situation in my life. As children, we were each other's only support at the school. We are bonded by cruelty and secrets. And made into hard, cold soldiers. Cora and Delilah are soft, gentle creatures compared to our harsh, jagged edges. I have no idea how to care for her properly. All we do is fuck and move on. We didn't stay in any place long enough to form any bonds with people, even if we wanted to.

Until them.

Then we latched on to Cora and Delilah like crazed, starved men and become obsessed with them. As much as Reaper has done his best to keep this a mission, we all know it was a lie.

He's just as obsessed.

Fallon's words drift through my mind like poison.

She'll never forgive you. She'll hate you when she finds out the truth.

He's right. And Cora will, too.

"Shouldn't I be the one having a breakdown right now?" Cora says, snapping my thoughts back to the tiny redhead before me. "You look like you're having an existential crisis."

Little does she know I am.

I take her hand and lead her to the stairs. "You're staying here tonight."

"I have to go back," she says, tugging her hand free. "I can't stay here. Rune will—"

"Rune will believe whatever Harlow tells him," I say, gripping her wrist and pulling her along. "You're staying with me tonight, and we'll

figure out the rest tomorrow."

She doesn't protest. She must realize there's no room for argument. I guess she learned a few things about us the last few weeks.

When we reach my bedroom door, I glance at her as I push it open, watching her reaction to my personal space. She takes a step through the door, and I realize just *how* much she trusts us. She's trusted us with her body. She's trusting us with her safety. That we're true to our word and will find a way to steal her back.

She doesn't know us. Neither woman does. They know our bodies and how we make them feel on a physical level, but they don't know us as men. That we're all broken pieces taped together by our loyalty to one another. They don't know that the love we gave each other was the only true affection we received in such a cold and unforgiving environment. That it morphed and changed over the years.

Father's love hurt. Fallon had none to give, only scars that we carry inside and out.

"Nice," she says, looking around my room.

I grab a shirt from my dresser and hand it to her. She rubs the material of the cotton between her fingers, looking around at my books and the thick, creamy comforter. The blinds covering the small window. How soft and delicate everything looks against the chipped walls and metal struts overhead.

"It was you," she says. "The bedding. You made sure we had nice things."

And dresses, but I keep that to myself.

I step back into the hall, my hand on the doorknob. "I'm going to get you something to drink."

Sill gently caressing the shirt, her startling green eyes meet mine. "Are we talking water or something to numb my brain?"

"How numb?" I ask.

"Completely blank."

I nod as I back away. "Change, and then we'll go to bed."

Her eyes dart to the large bed. "We?"

Her smile makes me grin as I shut the door.

Yeah. We.

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Chapter 28

Breaker

AFTER THAT FIRST NIGHTMARE when I was eight, I continued to dream of the blue room. Sometimes instead of room, I would dream I was drowning in an endless blue ocean, the water so cold it hurt the tip of my nose. The dreams changed every time, but the color blue was always the same.

Sometimes, I'd walk along a concrete beach, icy water lapping at my feet. I'd never seen a beach when the dreams began, only in pictures, so I didn't know how sand felt beneath my feet. Didn't know the smell and taste of salty air. But I knew the feel of cold concrete and that's what the beach felt like under me. Cold. Hard. As unforgiving as the school and the landscape around it.

Sometimes the dreams would jerk me awake. Other's I'd scream until one of my brothers woke me. Never did the endless blue change. It was always the same.

Antoinette blue.

Like Viper's eyes. Blue flecked with green. Sometimes green, bursting with blue, seemingly changing with his every emotion.

As I lie beside Cora, watching her sleep, I wonder what he's doing. If he's in his bed or if he's in bed with Striker, going to him in the middle of the night like he does with me, aching to be held.

I hope he is. I hope they are watching Delilah sleep right now, like I am with Cora, making sure she feels safe and warm. Because god did we

ever fuck up with her. With both of them.

I knew Cora needed a gentle touch, yet we treated Delilah so harshly, thinking we could train her similar to the way we were. That was what Fallon wanted. Control over her. For us to mold her until she was willing to do what we asked. Her affection for us brutally shaped the way Fallon shaped us.

Yet, we couldn't do it. Not even Reaper. Even though he's like Fallon in so many ways, he's not as cruel. Not nearly. Not even close. Even when he tries to be. Even when he knows he needs to be to make Fallon happy and leave us alone.

I love my father. I do. I've seen so many sides of him that I know underneath his cruelty, he's just a man. A man who loves deeply and uses his power in all the wrong ways. But he abused us in order to turn us into what we are. His soldiers. Killers. Ready at his command.

Until them.

They are what created the fissures in our relationship. He wanted us to watch them and keep tabs on them while Harlow gathered intel so we could slip in and take Rune down. But new cracks formed after every command, and we started breaking away from him.

I've always defied his orders. But Reaper, he did only once. Striker once. Viper.

God Viper.

I bury my face in her hair, missing him. We connected in some way that first day in school, and we just kept by each other's side. At first, I thought it was to protect me since I was the youngest, but over time, I felt the shift. We both did, even if I was the only one to admit it.

We changed. He changed.

I remained too young.

He became too feral.

It took years for us to finally break the barrier he'd set in place. After the night with them, my blood crackled with energy. I needed a release, so I let him suck my dick right in front of Striker. The way he looked at us was such a turn-on; I didn't last long before I was shooting my release into Viper's greedy mouth.

We've done that a hand full of times after sharing a women, but I think we all felt how different it was that night. After that, we left and went

to Viper's room where he fucked my hand, teeth on my neck, hands roving over my chest, groans so feral and desperate I got hard all over again.

We barely got any sleep that night.

God, I miss him.

All of them.

But I have our Little Red, right here, and I'm going to make sure she's taken care of. Even if I have to do it from afar.

Cora shifts, her ass pressing to my morning wood. The ache in my balls becomes harder to ignore. I didn't touch her last night. But in her sleep, her body gravitated to mine, and I wrapped her in my arms. When I woke up it was with her ass to my cock, my entire body engulfing hers. She's so small. So fiery. So absolutely breathtaking.

When she shoots back into me again, I growl into her hair and flip her onto her back, moving over her. The late morning light bleeds through the blinds across the room, casting long lines of pale yellow over her pretty face. Her stark green eyes blink open, and she smiles.

I swear to god, my heart stops.

I lean back, kneeling between her thighs, drinking the sight of her. Red hair set aflame in the morning light, fanned out over the pillow like rivers of lava. Eyes sparking like emeralds. Skin fair and dotted with her perfect little freckles, cheeks flushed from sleep. And desire.

I reach for my phone on the side table and snap a picture.

"What are you doing?" she asks, voice husky from sleep, thighs falling open as I shift between her legs.

"Sending them a picture."

The corner of her mouth lifts. My phone is forgotten. I toss it aside and lean over her, bracketing my arms on either side of her head. Her hips tilt toward me, and my cock pushes against my zipper. I slept fully clothed, not bothering to change from my slacks and white undershirt.

Cora's eyes roam all over me freely. Taking in the sight of my body, my face. Seeing me for the first time in daylight. I can't help but wonder what I need to do to make sure she wakes up every day in bed with me.

Me. Viper. Striker. Delilah. Reaper.

Shit. This is going to be a problem.

"Let me see them," Cora says, running her hands up my arms.

I let the thoughts go, knowing we need to worry about seeing this through before I start thinking too far ahead. I glance down at the black

tattoos lining my biceps. Reaching behind me, I pull the T-shirt off.

"Holy shit," she whispers, scooting to a sitting position to slide her warm little hands all over my chest. She's got that hungry look that matches exactly how I feel. Ravenous. "You're covered in tattoos."

Glancing down at where her hands trace the inked lines, I can't help but smile at the obvious appreciation in her voice. Viper used to try to hide it. Years ago, after that night with him, he doesn't bother, not when we're alone. Why he tries to when we're around Reaper or Striker I'm not sure. Neither one of them would judge, they never have. If anything, Reaper is the one who instigated that night by telling Viper to take ahold of my hard cock and guide it to the woman we were with.

He knows us all so well.

I've missed Viper's touch, but having Cora's small hands roaming over me, tracing inked lines, feeling the shape of my chest, and abs feels like absolute heaven.

I didn't realize how starved for touch I've been.

"Striker has this too," she says, tracing the first skull on my peck then moving to the next. "He has it on his back and Reaper has them on his knuckles." Her eyes dart up to meet mine. "And this last one. The fifth." She traces the slash over the last skull. "It's to represent the loss of your brother."

My chest constricts.

"You love them," she says. "Really love them."

"I do," I say. "I love everything about them."

"Tell me what that's like. To own so many hearts."

I huff out a laugh. Doesn't she know? The weeks we spent trying desperately not to care for them proved how much we craved her. Want her.

How easily she took hold of our hearts.

Coral leans back on her elbows, eyes still tracing the ink on my skin. "My mother hated me. My father didn't care enough to intervene. Rune despises me because of her. I think the only person who loves me is Delly."

My response is a gruff sound. Because holy fuck I almost opened my mouth and told her that I've loved everything about her for the last four years. Ever since I first saw her in the park with her yellow sundress and Care Bear hat. That Reaper adores her. I see it in the way he touches her and lets her touch him when he won't even let us. Striker is equally enthralled with her as he is Delly, and Viper.

Viper is *crazed*. So taken with our girls, I think he's the reason Reaper started to view them more as women than targets over the years. More than our revenge.

"I don't know what that expression means," she says, lifting her hand to point to my face. "Your face is very expressive, and it's doing a weird thing. Since this is my first time seeing that expression on this face, I'm not sure—"

I shut her up with a kiss.

"It means I want inside you," I tell her, lying her on her back. I trail kisses along her neck, down over her breasts and belly, nipping at the material resentfully that's hiding her perfect body. "It means I want my mouth on you. It means I want to hear you moan my name."

Her legs part as I slip lower until my mouth hovers over her cotton panties. I grip her shirt to slide it up, but her hands grab at the fabric, pulling it tight over her belly, pinning it to her sides. A giant flag waves frantically in the back of my head, but I don't stop to examine it. Not when her gorgeous pussy is inches from my face and I'm about to taste her.

I tap her hip, tugging at her thong. "Lift your hips, Little Red." Leaning back just enough, I ease her panties down, pulling her legs free, then unfold myself until I'm flat on my stomach, arm curled around her thigh, palm to her lower belly.

My gaze slides up her body to her face, my cock growing painfully hard at what I see. Her lips parted, eyes hooded, one hand gripping my shoulder, the other pressed to the wall above her head, hair spread out wildly around her.

I'm doomed. But I knew I was from the moment I saw her.

The memory flames through me, building the need to taste her to a boiling point. I lower my mouth.

"Oh fuck, yes," she hisses, hips bucking as I drag my tongue through her slit, tasting musk and salt and that slight tang that's distinctly her. Her hips tilt, searching for my mouth, but I pull back, only allowing my tongue to graze her clit before pulling away completely.

Her teeth grind. "*Breaker.* That's cruel."

Grinning, I lick my lips, then use the tip of my tongue to part her again. But this time, I don't stop. I dive in, using my tongue to spear into her, feeling her pussy flutter at the intrusion. The taste of her hikes that carnal need up higher. Covering my face with her slick desire, I breathe her

sweet, slightly musky scent into my lungs. With two fingers and no warning, I drive them into her, replacing my tongue and move to her clit. Sucking. Devouring. Fucking worshipping her. I eat her, palm pressed to her stomach to keep her still, grinding my dick into the sheet to help ease the growing need pulsing through it.

Her desperate little whimpers tell me she's close and I add a finger, stretching her pussy so she can take me right as I suck her clit into my mouth. Her small hands grab my head, pushing and pulling me closer until she rocking onto my face, and begging, begging, begging.

And then she breaks.

Warmth floods my tongue. I nearly come at the taste of her, at the thought that I've just brought her to the point of screaming my name. I release her clit and sit up, moving to kneel between her thighs too hungry to slow down.

She's barely coming down when I free my hard cock, shoving my pants down, pressing into her slick opening, trying to move into her like a greedy teenage boy.

Slow down. I need to remember to move slowly so I don't hurt her.

"Oh fuck," I groan, my tip inching into her. I lean forward to swallow her gasps, but she turns her face to the side, covering her mouth with her hand.

"Morning breath," she murmurs, her free hand grabbing my ass, trying to pull me in deeper.

"Hold on, Little Red. You're so tight. I don't want to hurt you." I press my forehead to hers, nearly curling over she's so much smaller than me. I never thought I had a thing for size, but I love how tiny she is. My hand next to her head is as large as her beautiful face. How her pale, thin arms look so small and frail compared to my dark, muscled ones. How delicate her jawline feels under my lips as I turn my head to place a kiss.

"Fuck me," she breathes, mouth pressed to my ear, her sweet little groans like a symphony as I slowly inch my way in, pulling back and driving in deeper with each slow thrust.

"*Fu-c*k," I hiss as I hit so deep, I can't go anymore and she whimpers, the slight hitch of breath, telling me I'm too deep, too big, lighting my blood on fire. "You're so tight."

Her response is a gasp as I drive in again slowly but deeply, bottoming out too soon. She's too tense. Too needy.

“Come on, Little Red, relax.” I pull out to drive in again, her slick pussy gripping me so tight I’m barely hanging on to my sanity. A dark, primal urge to drive into her, hard, deep, fuck her rough until she’s screaming in pain and pleasure, almost takes over, but I keep myself in check. “You feel so good, but I don’t want to hurt you.”

There’s a little nod and she breathes out in my ear. I slip in more, and I swear I almost black out. I take a minute to gather myself then start to move. One hand cradles the back of her head, the other grips her ass, pulling her gently to me every time I drive in. My entire hand cups one ass cheek and I let my fingers slip between them, feeling her wetness on her tight hole.

“Oh shit,” she rasps. “Fuck yes.”

I slip my finger over the tightness. “I can’t wait to get you home,” I grate, doing my best to keep my movements slow, angling my hips to hit that place that makes her whimper—

Like that.

Fuck yes. Just like that.

I drive in again, slightly harder, loving how her breath rushes from her lungs.

“Viper can’t wait to fuck this perfect ass,” I whisper, keeping my cheek to hers, my mouth to her ear. “You’ll look so beautiful taking his cock here.” My finger slips in slightly. The sound she makes has me moving just a little faster. It has me burying my face in her hair to breathe her in. Sweet fruits and something floral and dark. Like a summer day or an open field before nightfall. “So beautiful and tight, he’ll not last long, and he’ll fill this perfect ass with so much cum it’ll be leaking out of you.”

“*Yes*, yes, please,“ is all I hear between whimpers.

Fuck. I may die before she falls over the edge.

“Then I’ll use his cum to work my cock into your ass, fuck it deep into you, until you can barely breathe.” The image of taking her ass makes my head spin. That primal desire to claim every part of her makes me drive in harder. Faster. “Your tight little ass will be hard to get into. It’ll be tight fit, but I know you can take it, Little Red. Your sweet little pussy is taking my cock so good right now, squeezing it, trying to milk me of all my cum.

“Jesus, you’re filthy,” she breathes, her laughter strangled.

I thrust harder, plunging my finger deeper into her ass, and she cries out, head thrown back. My grip on her little body tightens. I keep a firm

grasp on her ass as I plunge in and out of both holes, keeping her completely at my mercy. Her hands move from my ass, to my head, to the pillow, to the wall, trying to find anything to hold onto as I fuck her.

"Deeper," she groans, and I have to suck in a breath and focus on not coming at the desperate way she begs. Focus on not fucking her into mattress. "Harder. Fuck me h*arder*."

"That's right, sweet girl. Beg me more. I fucking love it."

"Please, please, *please*." The last word shudders from her when I grind my hips, my balls hitting her ass.

"And while I'm buried balls deep in your ass, Striker can take your pretty pussy." My balls hit again. Again. My cock throbs, the need to come turning every word raspy. "You'll be so filled up with cock you'll know with every breath that you're ours."

My last few words send her over, and I kiss her throat through it, grinding my teeth to keep the fragile hold on my sanity. Her release unfolds gently at first, like a blooming flower, opening up slowly, back arching, her head thrown back, until she bursts open and a guttural cry breaks free. Her walls squeeze my cock so tight, a husky, desperate groan grates from my throat, and I try to hold on so I can rip another from her, but it's too much.

"Fuck," I breathe, alternating between squeezing my eyes closed and trying to keep them open. I don't want to miss a minute of her.

My chest expands as Cora's eyes flutter open and meet mine. The green shimmers like bright new leaves covered in dew, flickering with so many emotions, it feels like they're cutting me to pieces. Heat builds in my spine, and my balls draw up tight. She's too beautiful, feels too good. I crack open. Fireworks shoot through my veins, and it feels like every fragment of who I am, every broken piece, is careening into her, desperate to connect. I bury my face in her neck, hips moving in short, jerky thrusts, sloppy and out of rhythm, as I ride out my release.

We lie still, catching our breaths before I sit upright, kneeling between her thighs, pulling her with me to keep our bodies joined, the need to keep our connection, almost primitive.

Cora props herself on her elbows to look between us. My dick is slick with her, with both of us, and I drive my semi-hard cock back into her, watching her pussy tighten around me. My cum gathers on my cock as I slowly move in and out. Still buried in her, and I gather up my cum and slip two fingers into her, pushing my it deep and using my dick to drive it in.

“The second I get you back to him, I’m going to fuck you just like this and watch Viper eat my cum from this perfect pussy.”

She makes a strange sound, and our eyes lock. “My god. You’re a fucking animal.”

She has no idea.

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Chapter 29

Breaker

"WHY ARE WE IN the men's bathroom?" she asks, her voice echoing in the large open space.

I set Cora down on the cold tile floor looking around at the chipped and cracked paint, once white but yellowed with age. The open shower stalls with rust stains weeping down the faded tiles, the row of urinals, the booths with toilets at the back. We never bothered to renovate it since it had showers and toilets. That's all we needed.

Seeing her, this perfect woman with soft skin, and fragile limbs, I wish we had taken the time to at least repaint. But we're so used to ugly things, it never crossed our mind.

Now… maybe…

Maybe we can have things that are new. Clean. Soft like her.

"The women's washroom is next to this one. Would you rather clean up in there?" I tug at her shirt to lift it over her head, but she clamps it down, holding it in firm little fists at her sides.

Her eyes dart to up mine. "Clean up?"

The cagy expression taking over her delicate features unsettles the open, light feeling in my chest and makes me take a step back. I ignore how her eyes fall to my still semi-hard dick, hanging out of my open pants. I knew if I didn't get her cleaned up and out of my bed, I'd keep her there all day, but we have too much shit to do.

Or rather, Ben does.

Besides, Harlow will be here soon and I don't want to be balls deep in her when he arrives. Plus, I need to get her a change of clothes since she has nothing but her ruined dress and heels.

"Go pee." I point to the row of stalls as I turn one of the shower knobs on the far wall. The spray hits my arm. I step away to remove my pants, noting that she's both not moving to relieve herself like I said and watching my every move.

The way her face remains frozen, emotionless, stirs up my thoughts, making me uneasy. There's no lust in her gaze as I remove my slacks and stand before her naked. No, she's got that slightly wild look in her eyes she gets when she's panicking.

It sets my teeth on edge because I don't understand why she's upset about being in the bathroom with me.

I point again to the stall at the back of the restroom. "Go."

The need to remind her that she's prone to UTIs sits at the tip of my tongue, but I keep the reminder in my mouth. Now's not the time to reveal how much I know about her. We followed her to every doctor's appointment, and I hacked the computers at the offices to see what prescription she was getting filled because the thought of her being sick made me ill.

It's best to keep that to myself since the look on her face already screams with anxiety. The last thing she needs to know is the man she's just fucked knows things about her that even Delilah doesn't.

With a deep breath, she finally does as I ask, walking to the back of the room and closing the stall behind her. I step under the shower spray, my stomach in knots, as I watch her emerge from the stall a minute later.

There's something wrong.

"Come here," I say, crooking my finger. She doesn't move. My teeth grind. "Cora."

My tone makes her bite her lip. Unease grips my gut.

She said he didn't violate her last night, but I swear to god I think she's lying. If I just fucked her after she was abused, I may actually have to —

"I don't have any clothes," she says, watching me watch her.

"I'm going to leave and grab you something to wear before Harlow arrives," I tell her, trying to keep my shit together as I turn my face to the warm spray. I let the rushing water slip over me for a minute, waiting for

her to join me. She' doesn't. When I blink away the water drops to look at her, I see she's still not moved.

Knots. My stomach, my chest, my heart is twisted into a painful knot. "Harlow texted me this morning. He'll be here soon. Let's get you cleaned up."

Still no movement. I'm used to our Little Red not obeying orders, but this is different. This isn't her being defiant to irritate me. She's worried about something. *Scared.*

"Did you follow him too?" she asks, clutching again at the shirt. It falls to her knees and she's so tiny, it would be adorable and sexy if she wasn't making me so nervous.

I take another deep breath, letting her take the conversation in another direction. It's possible everything I told her last night is hitting home and that's why she looks like she's about to dart for the door. "Harlow has helped us gather intel for the last four years. We've kept an eye on him as well. He's known all along we followed him too."

I watch her face as she absorbs this, her fingers curling into the sides of her shirt. *Shit*. Something happened. And she's hiding it under that shirt.

"Little Red," I snap, my voice too harsh as I step from under the water and stalk toward her. The woman can't seem to help herself because her eyes fall to between my legs. If I wasn't so eaten up with worry, I'd be hard with the way she's looking at me but she's hiding something. "Take off your shirt off."

She shakes her head.

"Cora."

"I told you they didn't touch me in that way," Cora says. My shoulders ease. "Clyde stopped them."

Them. Jesus Christ. I'm just now realizing she's been saying *them*.

"I swear nothing happened last night," she says like she can read my thoughts. I must look relieved because she continues. "But Rune…"

Fucking Christ. I grip the shirt and rip it over her head, not caring about her protests, her angry little cry of alarm, or that fact I'm being too rough with her.

I scan her body, looking for signs of abuse when I see it.

Rage is a strange emotion. It can hit all at once or sneak up on a person like a rising tide, slowly, until it covers your mouth and eyes, and you're suddenly drowning.

“He *bit* you?“ It’s not so much a question as a hiss of air exiting my lungs, tainted with disbelief. We suspected Rune may have been hurting her over the years, but I never once thought it was sexual. The thought never crossed my mind. It was too horrific.

When she told us about him, I think I must have gone into shock because I could barely comprehend what she was saying.

He was hurting her.

Rune hurt our girl.

Seeing the evidence on her skin makes it real.

So does the thrumming need for blood coursing through me.

Noise fills my head, drowning out all sounds. I hear her telling me he just bit her, *just bit*, like that’s not enough to justify my rage, and that he didn’t assault her.

Like *she’s* reassuring *me*.

Our Little Red is trying to make me feel better about the violence inflicted upon her.

The reality makes my gut churn. I want to tell her she doesn’t need to soothe me. I’m not the one that needs reassurance. I’m not upset with her, but the room tilts slightly, and I think I may pass out from the surge of anger, rage, fear, and the absolute need for destruction that hits me so hard my lungs decompress. I press my hand to the wet tile wall, trying to stop the thunder clashing in my head.

“It’s not okay,” I manage and her brows pinch.

“It’s not that bad,” she says. “He’s done worse.”

“That’s *worse*, Cora,“ I hiss as my blood courses with toxic venom.

I need to break something. Ruin. Destroy. I can’t imagine what I must look like right now. Viper says I’m a scary mother fucker when I’m angry and coming from him means I must look homicidal to her.

I feel like a raging maniac. Twisted up and sick with fury.

That’s when I see the stitches.

I know instantly what it means. It was Viper who followed them to the doctor’s office and me who downloaded the files onto my laptop to see why they went.

Birth control implants for both of them.

Nothing out of the ordinary.

But it’s been removed after she was returned to Rune so she could marry Zane. That rage bubbling over a minute ago is now a hot volcano of

fury, making it hard to think. To breathe. Making it difficult to see past the fact he plans to put a child in my woman.

In *our* woman.

“Can you say something?” Cora asks. “You’re freaking me out.”

I can’t say anything because nothing logical comes to mind. She’s right about what she said earlier. I’m a fucking animal. And my animal brain has too many things happening in it right now to form a coherent sentence.

I’m relieved he didn’t sexually assault her. I’m angry she obviously hurt. I’m enraged we put her in this situation to begin with. I’m furious that she was alone and scared, and I hate myself for not being there to protect her.

He hit her. He bit her.

I want to put her in my chest. Stop this agony that’s ripping through me, and that’s so selfish; I hate myself even more because all it would do is ease my guilt. But the need to hide her away and protect her is overwhelming because I know in just two hours, I have to hand her over to Harlow.

Then there are the two other thoughts. The two most primitive thoughts crashing through my head are so vile, I don’t want to stain her with them.

The first part of my brain is telling me to pick her up, take her back to my bed and fuck her senseless. Fuck her again. Then again. Keep her tied up, in chains if need be, and fuck her over and over, fill her up with so much of my cum, she’ll not be able to walk without leaking it down her thighs. Until there’s no doubt in anyone’s mind she’s carrying *my* child. Not that fucking demon’s but mine. I didn’t even know this was a kink of mine until right this second.

No, not a kink, an absolute *need*.

“Breaker?”

Deep breath. My lungs burn. “Yes, Little Red?”

She bites her lip, drawing my eyes. “Your face is doing that thing again, and I don’t know what it means.”

It means everyone who’s ever seen me, the real me, was right. I’m a fucking monster.

Her eyes drop to my cock. My very hard, very needy cock that wants very primal things.

“What are you thinking?” she asks, stepping under the shower with me.

My second thought? The one that’s currently taking over my animal brain is simple.

Death. Destruction. Kill.

I’m going to be the one to fucking kill Rune Gavin.

And I’ll smile as I’m ripping him apart.

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Chapter 30

Breaker

9 Years Ago, December, Age 19

MY HANDS TREMBLE SLIGHTLY. I shove them in my pockets, gathering the lining into fists as I pace the dingy room. I've already showered but I think I need to again. Scrub my skin, my *mind*, clean of the things I've done.

"Stop pacing," Viper says. "You're making me nervous."

A laugh breaks free of my throat, raw and raspy. He should be nervous with me in the room. He now knows what I'm capable of doing.

Bing Crosby belts out a song from the flatscreen, making me wince. I hate these old movies. Cook used to love them, and he'd always have them playing on the small tube TV in the kitchen while he worked. Afterwards, he'd sit in the kitchen and drink his vodka at night until he stumbled to his room and passed out. Sometimes we'd find him in the morning, still in the kitchen, slumped over on the peeling vinyl floor, and we'd have to either

wake him up before Fallon found him or Viper would drag him to his room to finish sleeping it off.

I don't know why Viper constantly covered for him. The man was a drunk and mean as shit half the time.

"Haven't you watched this a million times?" I ask Viper. He's sprawled out on the hotel room floor, his back at the end of the bed. The only light in the room comes from the TV, casting him in blue shadows, outlining his chest and every single divot of his perfect stacked abs.

After he showered, he didn't bother putting on a shirt, and my eyes keep gravitating toward him. Every time he brings the glass bottle to his lips, his biceps bulge, drawing my attention. He rarely drinks, but today was difficult. A lot of memories resurfaced.

His throat moves as he takes another long pull. Viper drops the bottle, licking his lips. My cock thickens in my pants, and I hate how aware I am of him. My gaze drops from the auburn stubble over his Adam's apple to his chest and the large tattoo. We all got them after I turned of age. A skull for each of us, representing the hell we survived. The punishments, the endless training, and the years of torture that's now etched into our bones—the very fabric of our being. The servitude, the absolute devotion to our Father, and each other.

We are Fallon's soldiers. And we wear the evidence on our skin.

"TV off." I kick his leg, irritated he's not answering me. If anyone should drink, it's me.

He looks up, aquamarine eyes slightly glassy, telling me he's tipsy but not completely plastered. *Thank god*. I don't want to deal with him tonight if he's drunk.

His smirk has my stomach dipping. "And now it's a million and one times."

My eye roll makes him hoot with laughter. *Idiot.* "Will you turn that fucking movie off? I want to go to sleep."

Not that I'll be able to. Not with my head feeling like this. All electric and upturned, yet somehow hollow. Like atoms are pinging around my skull, fucking up my thoughts.

Between the cheap motel we checked into and the day we've had, I doubt any of us will get much sleep. Viper and I usually take a room together if we can't get five separate ones, which is mostly fine. Mostly. Sometimes it feels a little weird, but I think it's more me than him. He still

won’t admit it. Possibly still doesn’t know I feel it too. Then again, I’ve never told him.

Tonight, though, I wish we weren’t in the same room. Tonight, I wish I’d have taken a room with Reaper, but he’s rooming with Hunter as usual, and Striker refused, saying he can’t stand mine or Viper’s snoring.

It’s just one night, I tell myself, *then we leave in the morning.*

“I’m not tired,” Viper says, although he turns the TV down as he stands, but then flops right back down on the end of his bed. “I feel….”

Yeah. I feel it, too.

Wired. Skin moving, itching. Like I have ants under my skin.

This wasn’t my first mission. My first mission was a few months back. It was simple. Be the lookout and support for Striker. Make sure he got out safely and unseen after taking out our target.

It all went beautifully.

So did the next and the one after that. The one to extract and hold for ransom was harder because the guy cried for two days straight, wailing and pleading to the point Viper gagged him and threatened to shove his dick in his mouth to keep him quiet. He shut up after that, but every time I brought him water, he’d wince and shrink back into himself, making my insides pinch with guilt. I wasn’t sure how it was going to end for the guy. But then we were told to return him, and we dumped him outside his office building, then waited for his associates to retrieve him.

He was lucky. I think Reaper was, too. Hunter, as well. It was a straightforward job in the grand scheme of things.

But this one, the one I completed today, was harder. It required my skills. And that meant Viper saw me at my worst. Or best, if you ask Fallon. Maybe that’s why he’s drinking. He can’t bare to think about what I carry inside me.

The thought sticks, making my throat close.

We got the information we needed, and Reaper finished the job for me. I was glad to hand it over to him. Some things are harder to stomach, and I don’t think I could dispose of our target. Extracting the information was brutal. Our target fought me every step of the way.

Now I feel…

I don’t know what I feel. How I feel.

Dismantled, maybe, but not exactly broken up. Not exactly terrible inside, like the day I was named. Our target wasn’t a good man. Maybe that

helps. But he wasn’t pure evil either. And I wasn’t driven by hatred or the need to hurt him, make him feel pain like he’d inflicted on another. It was a job. Just something I had to do because I was ordered to get the information we were paid to extract, by any means.

So, I did.

That’s what I find concerning. It was me chiseling away with no remorse, no emotions until I had what we needed. I tell myself at least I’m self-aware. I know I should feel more, but it just feels like I have a crater in my chest. A vast, open, inky black space that grew darker and darker with every act. Like every time I had to go a little harder and push the guy more and more, it cut parts of me out too.

Maybe my name is fitting. Maybe I’m broken inside. Nothing but cracked pieces and sharp edges.

I stop pacing and snatch the bottle from Viper, taking a gulp. The burn as it goes down reminds me I’m not completely dead inside. My body still works properly, even if my mind is fucked. Even if I’m nothing but the broken bits of the man I tortured today.

You’re a good, sweet boy.

I wonder if Hunter still thinks that.

When I hand Viper the bottle back, he shakes his head, looking up at me with those eyes that are the color of my every bad memory and my every desire. They fall to my chest, then down to my crotch before flickering away.

That look he gave me zins through me chest. Taking a step closer, my knee hits his. I’m taller than him now by several inches. Muscular thanks to my training, but he’s huge. Sculpted.

I wish he’d put his shirt back on.

He’s so chiseled, smooth chest and defined perfection. So *unbroken*.

Ripping my eyes from his body, I step back. “I’m taking a shower,” I say, setting the glass bottle on the cheap laminated table by the windows.

He stands, grabbing my arm. “You’ve already showered.”

I shake him off. The need to bathe again, get this sticky feeling off my flesh is too intense to bare, but I don’t say the words aloud. I don’t say I need to scald the last few hours from my mind, my body, my fucking *soul*, because then he’d try to parent me, and we’ll just end up fighting as usual.

“Break—“

“Stop,” I snarl, stalking toward the small bathroom.

“Will you just talk to me?”

I turn, shoving him away as I do. God, I’m so sick of him pushing me. Getting into my space. Forcing me to look at my emotions, and talk. Doesn’t he know I’m a monster with sharp teeth and anger issues?

“I don’t need you to fucking console me or tell me to use my coping skills. You’re not my caretaker.” I reach for the knob, but he grabs my arm again.

Goddammit.

My fingers curl around his throat before I’m thinking, whipping his body around and slamming him into the wall. He grunts but doesn’t fight me. He rarely does unless I go too far.

Which right now, I want to.

“Leave me the *fuck* alone.“ The words come out gritty, just like the warning. “You’ve seen what I am. Don’t push me.”

“That’s not you.” Viper’s face contorts, his brows knitting. “He made you that way. Monsters aren’t born, they’re created.”

My fingers tighten at his throat, anger bubbling over. “Stop lying to yourself. I *am* that way. A monster through and through. I always have been. And you know it.”

“Fallon brainwashed you,” he gasps out, struggling to speak as my hand squeezes. “You’re just a boy.”

I growl, pushing against his throat, harder. “Do I look like a boy to you?”

He winces, but still refuses to fight me. Irritation rattles through my bones like an angry beast wanting free of its cage.

“I earned my name. I wanted to fucking do it. I wanted to hurt that man,” I spit out. “Fallon didn’t force me to do anything.”

“Fallon coerced you. You were just a kid.”

Images flash in my mind, and I close my eyes, trying to sort through it all. The past and present bleed together, creating one grotesque nightmare in my head.

“I did what I had to do today to complete our mission,” I say through clenched teeth. “I got the information we were paid to get. Job done. You would have done the same thing.”

“I’m different,” Viper says, his voice dropping. Somehow, we’re closer together, and our voices have lowered, almost whispering. “I’m not good like you.”

His words only fuel my anger further. Viper sees me as this kid. This unstained lamb he's always had to protect. He took punishments meant for me, kept me alive when I thought death was inevitable. He's constantly protecting me, covering for me. But he doesn't see the darkness that consumes me, the blood on my hands that will never wash away.

My grip tightens again, and I move in even closer, using my height to crowd him, so he's forced to look up at me. His breath hisses out of him. "It's not your fucking job to keep me from bad things."

"Of course, I'm going to protect you," Viper says, trying to shove me away. "You're my brother."

"You're hardly my *brother*," I spit, releasing him from my grip.

He's such an asshole. Refusing to admit what lives inside us both. This isn't a one-sided thing. It's not just me. Viper feels this forbidden pull, always drawing us together. He's just too stubborn to admit it. I've felt the heat of his gaze, seen the agony written all over his face when I've caught him looking. The problem isn't even Father. I think he suspects, though he's said nothing. The problem is my age. It always has been.

Stepping further back, I grip my shirt and rip it over my head, tossing it to the floor as I head for the small bathroom, anger making each step rigid and hurried.

The stupid thing is, I'm only four years younger than him. That's it. When we were younger, I could understand his hesitation, but I'm older now. Bigger than him, yet he treats me like I'm this small boy he has to coddle. He doesn't realize that I'm not innocent. Far from it. My innocence was stripped away. My body may be untouched, but my soul was torn open and ruined a long time ago.

"Breaker." His voice is still lowered. A whisper.

I pause, hearing the pain creaking out with my name. When I face him, I find that same, almost feral look in his eyes that matches how I feel whenever we're alone and there are no distractions. When the lights are out, and no one can see that I want to touch him. In ways I've never touched anyone, simply because I listened to him all those years ago. No one should touch me unless they have my heart.

But then he averts his gaze.

Like looking at me with such heat is shameful. Like *I'm* shameful.

That look scrapes over me, making my blood spark with fury. Fuck him.

Before I’m processing what I’m doing, I’m stalking forward, one hand gripping his throat, the other at my belt. He finds me horrifying? I’ll show him how repulsive I am, and then he’ll have an excuse to look away.

Viper’s back slams into the wall. A breath huffs out as his head hits the surface hard, but I don’t let up on my grip. My belt *clinks* as I pull the buckle free. His eyes drop to my hand as I tug the leather loose.

“Can’t look at me?” My voice is made of sharp blades. I rip my belt from the loops. “Do you find me grotesque, *brother*?”

His eyes flash with rage, but he doesn’t fight to remove my hand from his throat. Just fists his hands at his sides, letting me roughly handle him.

Releasing him, I step back, then grip the belt at each end, hooking it over his head, and looping it around his neck. I grip the leather tightly closed at his throat, causing the veins in his forehead to bulge. His eyes flash again, with shock and something else. Something that resembles heat and pain and desire as I use my entire body to pin him to the wall.

“I’m not a fucking *boy*,“ I snarl. I feel feral, unhinged, that monster in me breaking free. “Boys don’t slice off skin and body parts.”

“Stop,” he whispers with a gasp, and faintly I’m aware he’s still not fighting me. He has one hand on the belt at his neck now, the other on my shoulder, but he’s not pushing me away.

Viper squeezes his eyes shut, and I feel it. The thick, hard press of his dick against my thigh. Shock makes my grip loosen. A curling heat traveling from the base of my spine to my cock makes my fingers tighten all over again.

I glance down between us. Millimeters separate our bodies, our only connection is his dick hitting my leg with every ragged breath. I suck in air, my chest expanding, brushing his warm flesh. The flickering blue light from the TV behind us deepens the shadows on his body, outlining every muscle and curve of his torso. Shadows his mouth and darkens the hue of his eyes. The urge to kneel before him and run my tongue over his abs makes my knees weak.

“Back the fuck off, Break,” he says between shaky breaths.

His cock hits my leg again. He’s so hard, I can see the perfect outline of his dick, the head, the entire shaft trapped against him. I dip my head low, so my mouth is near his ear and inhale, taking his clean, citrusy sent

into me. It fills my chest, making that roiling, unclean feeling fade. Like he can cleanse me of the things I've done today.

My lips brush the shell of his ear. "Is that what you want?" His heavy exhales don't give me an answer, so I squeeze the belt. "Or do you want me closer?"

"*F-uck*," he groans, hips jerking, almost involuntarily.

"Your cock is saying something different from your mouth," I rasp. An electric shiver moves through him into me. "It's pressing so hard against me, I think it wants out."

A short, breathy exhale is all he gives. His eyes dart to meet mine.

You feel it. Just fucking admit it.

I grind my hips into him, letting Viper feel my cock trapped in my pants. Viper's entire body reacts almost violently. Nails dig into my skin. A breath heaves out with a groan. His head angles back, eyes fluttering closed.

That's what I thought.

"Take it out," I grate. "*Now*."

The hand at the belt drops, fingers on my shoulder grip harder. My head swims when I hear the grate of his zipper. The fact he's listening to me makes me so hard that I drop my free hand and pop the button on my pants. Those eyes I love flutter open.

"You want my cock out?" I rasp. "I'm so fucking hard right now. Do you want to watch me fuck my hand?"

Viper's eyes shift to my mouth.

"Use your words." I lean in and whisper, "Be a good boy and tell me what you want."

A light gasp of shock, then the next few words scrape from his throat raw and desperate, "Show me. I want to see you come."

"That's a good boy. Now take out your cock." My eyes dip to watch as he uses one hand to shove his pants low enough that he can free himself, then grips his hard length.

The sight is so erotic, and feels so wrong, that I hurriedly drag my cock from my pants and wrap my hand around my shaft, slipping pre-cum from the head to the root.

"Stroke it," I order, keeping my voice low, my eyes trained on his hand gripping his dick.

Another breath rattles out of him, but he does as commanded. Takes a long, slow pull from root to tip, then back.

“Harder, Viper. I know you like things rough.”

“Shit,” he hisses, but squeezes his cock and drags his hand roughly up and down. He pauses, eyes flickering with something, but it’s too late.

This is happening.

My chest heaves, fireworks sparking through me. “I didn’t say stop, naughty boy.”

“Fuck,” he grates. Licking his lips, he slowly strokes himself, his gaze locked on my mouth like he’s craving more filth to spill from between my lips.

I can’t deny him anything, so I say, “That’s a good boy. Stroke harder.” My hand matches his pace, fingers pinching the head of my dick with every brutal stroke. I lean forward, gathering saliva and spit on his dick.

“Jesus,” he groans, body going slack. I grip the belt, keeping him upright. He drags my spit along his length, coating it, strokes harder and faster now.

I release my cock and bring my hand to his mouth. “Spit.”

His eyes brighten, blue fire igniting in them. He spits and I hiss out a breath as my hips drive forward, my cock hitting his exposed waist. His head tilts back, hitting the wall, watching my mouth through his long lashes.

“Good, boy,” I rasp, drinking in the sight of his jawline, the way it flexes as he pumps. “Fuck your hand for me.”

His brows pinch together as he sucks in air, jerking off faster. My grip on the belt tightens as I bring the wetness to my cock and stroke hard, fast, my forehead against the wall above his shoulder, my eyes pinned to the long column of his neck. Our hands bump with each stroke. Every inhale drags his clean scent into my lungs. Every exhale feels like I’m releasing my demons onto him. They fan the side of his face and his shoulder with each hot breath. Touch his lips when he turns his face to me.

“Harder,” I grate, barely hanging on. “Fuck your hand.”

His raspy groan as he does as commanded sends firecrackers to the base of my spine, erupting into a liquid heat that shoots out, hitting his hip. I rasp out a moan as I come, my legs giving slightly, hips jerking as I fuck my hand harder, faster, riding it out, my head dropping to his shoulder.

“Oh, *fuck*,“ he groans, and warm cum hits my arm. “Fuck, fuck, fuck,” he rasps, rocking into me, the tip of his hot dick slipping over the

back of my hand.

I open my eyes, watching his features contort and then smooth out. How he bites his lip as he pumps himself, eyes opening and locking on my mouth like he's imagining my lips wrapped around him. How sexy he is as he rides it out. The urge to suck his lip into my mouth, taste the needy groans leaving him, makes me shift closer.

Viper slumps, breaths heavy, slick sweat on his chest slipping over mine.

He averts his gaze.

I release the belt, sliding it free.

The hand that was gripping my shoulder withdraws, and he uses it to swipe at the copper tendrils of hair that fell over his forehead.

I slink back, tucking myself away. He turns his back to me as he zips his pants. He glances down as he does, hand sicky with my cum. I glance at my forearm, the blueish lights making his cum glisten.

My heart skips, leaps as he faces me, but then it careens to the floor, crashing at my feet when he refuses to meet my eyes.

"Don't ever tell anyone what just happened," he says, then stalks across the room, grabs the bottle of vodka, and slams back a drink.

My foot slides back, then the other. I swallow, but it feels like shards of glass in my mouth as I do *God, it's fucking painful*, so I grind my teeth to stop myself from trying to wash away this tight feeling in my throat. I shut the bathroom door behind me, collapsing against the dirty white door, hand unfurling weakly from the knob. My knees finally give. I slide to the floor, my eyes unfocused on the grimy black and white tiled floor.

An ache writhes in my chest, growing, pulsing, becoming a dark void that devours my every breath, cuts like sharp claws into my heart.

It's no wonder my heart hurts. Viper just took an icepick to it and hacked at my most vulnerable parts with ruthless precision.

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Chapter 31

Striker

"DID YOU GET THE text?" Viper asks, following me up the stairs.

"Don't have my phone with me." I stalk down the hallway once we reach the top floor, pulling my shirt away from my chest. It sticks to me like a second layer of skin, dried sweat and salty morning mist dampening the fabric. "What did Breaker do now?"

"Doing what Breaker does best," Viper says, boots thudding behind me. "Breaking rules and fucking shit up."

When I reach my room, I peel off my shirt and toss it on the floor, my skin pricking with unease.

Viper comes in behind me and closes the door, ripping his mask off and running a hand through his hair as he tosses his mask on my bed.

I sigh, and continue toward the bathroom. I hate the sticky feeling of being unclean. The darkness always tries to invade and the only way to remove the shadows lingering in the back of my mind is to scrub my skin.

I finished the morning run with Princess, then attempted another practice session. When she missed one shot after another, I suggested we take a break. My patience today is stretched thin, and I know it's contributing to this gnawing sensation in my bones.

Reaper must have seen my expression when we crossed paths in the foyer, because he shook his head and said to give her time. Time. Asshole. He's not given her or us any of his. The last few days, he's once again been absent, and I can't help but wonder which part of this entire fucked up

situation has him on edge. The fact we've already begun training, which feels too soon, or that if Delilah been in the school, she'd have not lasted more than a few weeks before Fallon removed her.

She's trying so hard, rarely complaining, doing everything we ask when we ask, but the woman is awful with a gun. If it weren't so frustrating, it would be laughable. It's possible her history is getting in the way, some sort of self-sabotage, so she doesn't have to fire a gun. While I don't blame her hesitation or her ability to concentrate while holding a rifle, it's going to eventually work against her.

Even though she's doing well with Viper, at times surprising us with what looks like a natural ease holding a knife, we need her ready and capable for what's coming. And a gun is the fastest way for her to accomplish her mission.

"—no thinking. This is too soon. Delilah isn't ready," Viper's saying, still behind me like a shadow as I walk to the bathroom. "What the fuck is he thinking?"

In the doorway, I turn to face him, and his chest hits mine, his forehead hitting my cheek. I wince, my hands landing on his shoulders. "Fuck, Vipe."

Three days this man has been up my ass. It's no wonder Breaker wanted to strangle him half the time and they ended up fighting constantly. Without him here, Viper's full attention is on me and I'm ready to toss him down the stairs.

Instead of apologizing for being in my space, he steps back holding out his phone. Rubbing my cheek, I glance at the screen, the image of Cora taking up my entire line of sight. My heart skips as I take in the sight of her. She's a goddess, a perfect picture of ethereal grace bathed in a halo of shimmering gold.

"This morning?" I ask. "Breaker has her now?"

He nods. "I know," Viper says, reading my expression. "I'd love to have her in bed with us like that."

I note that he doesn't say him. He says us.

All of us.

And how does that work? Do we take turns with them? Get a large bed and we all fucking cuddle? This may be the first time I've stopped to think about what we're doing. We're asking these two women to be with us.

With us.

Both of them with four men.

The four of us are so used to doing everything together that it never crossed my mind, and probably none of theirs, that we're expecting two women to take us to bed, stay with us, remain loyal to us, and just accept that is their life now.

Us. Us. Us.

We were trained early on that we're a unit, a team. What one does, we all do. They weren't. What the fuck are we thinking? That we're all just going to fuck and live together?

"You realize he's never going to believe her," Viper says, snapping me back to my current problem. Him in the way of my shower.

"Who?" I ask, shoving him backward, trying to push him out the door.

"Rune," he says, body rocking with the force of my push, but he remains planted in front of me. He's a wall of determined muscled, wanting to talk and be in my space.

With another shove, he steps back, barely registering I want him to move. My hand slips over his tight shirt wrapped around his hard chest, making my dick spring to life.

That, I'm not in the mental space to deal with, so I ignore my thickening cock, setting aside the thoughts staining my mind, along with the many issues I'll face later. *After* my shower.

When I realize he's not going to leave me alone, I give up, tugging at my laces, then pull my boots off, tossing them toward Viper, who's leaning against the sink now, watching me remove my socks.

"Rune won't believe we didn't tell her anything," Viper says. "And why the fuck did we even think this was going to work?"

"Which part?" I kick my socks aside and then turn my back to him to pull the shower curtain open.

The entire mission has gotten so far out of hand, out of our control, it's terrifying. We had a plan. Spent four years making sure it was going to go smoothly, and then the second we took them it went sideways. Now Breaker's gone rogue and set the entire mission into motion, Cora is in the hands of our enemy and set to marry that bastard Zane, and Delilah is so ill prepared, it's horrifying.

"All of it," Viper says. "The Snyder Group. Breaker as Ben. You. Me. And then the whole thing with Reaper is still a problem we need to deal

with…”

Ignoring his incessant talking, I pop the button of my pants, unzip them, then hook my fingers into the waistband of my fatigues and tug.

Viper’s rambling comes to an abrupt stop.

My hands drop, pants hanging low on my hips. Our eyes collide.

Fire crashes through my blood, every single thought flooding to my cock. How many times have we done this? Showered in the large bathroom at the school? At the factory? But he’d not sucked my dick then. Now he knows the feel of me in his mouth. The taste of my skin and how my cum feels sliding down his throat. And I know how it feels to have his mouth on me.

“Shit,” he says.

I rub my chest, feeling the scar over my heart. My cock hardens even more from the way he’s looking at me, eyes locked onto my open zipper and the top of my dick like he’s remembering all those things too.

We were here just a week ago, just like this, and here we are again because Viper is shit with boundaries.

He runs his tongue over his bottom lip. “Your sexy ass is really tempting.”

“My ass is off limits.” My heart does an odd flip at just the thought of him *and* my ass in the same sentence. “Not even up for discussion right now.”

He nods, understanding. “But your cock isn’t off limits.”

Well. I have nothing to say to that. All the things I don’t want to face are standing a foot away, with heated eyes, eating up the sight of me.

Viper reaches behind him and tugs at the back of his shirt, pulling it over his head, hard abs rippling as it slips off. The muscles in his chest move as he slowly rolls the shirt into a ball, watching my reaction. I think this is the first time I’ve ever seen Viper waiting on anything. Viper does not wait. He takes what he wants when he wants it, never bothering to ask, especially not permission.

My eyes dart to his face. He’s so fucking handsome. It grates on me. I think I’ve always hated that I’ve been attracted to him, noticing him more than I should have as we grew into men. Breaker was only two years younger, but everything about him felt innocent and maybe that’s why I never really *saw* him until we were older. Nothing about Viper is chaste. He’s lust and sex wrapped up in the tempting body of a god.

Viper’s throat moves as he swallows, my gaze fixing on the auburn stubble, remembering how he greedily swallowed my cum. When his blue eyes meet mine, they flare with bright heat, the vanity light making them sparkle like gemstones. I feel my gaze slip to his lips, the memory of their softness around my hard length making my blood spark just as hot as his eyes.

At some point, we both moved, some primal force drawing us together. Citrus and sweat flood my senses. We’re so close I can feel the slight tremble move through his chest into mine. Viper’s hand lands on my waist, and my breath bursts from my lungs.

“Just do it,” he whispers, the heat of his words caressing my cheek. “Just fucking do it already because I don’t think I have the nerve.”

My eyes dip to his mouth. His tongue runs seductively over his bottom lip. The need to know what that lip feels like makes me lean in. Our noses brush. His breath fans over my face. My top lip meets his bottom. Keeping our eyes locked, I angle my head slightly, feeling the slight stubble under the cleft of his bottom lip. His hips jerk almost involuntarily, and his cock digs into my thigh.

“Fuck.” It’s more of a release of a breath than a whole word and I can practically taste his beg. His fingers tighten more, digging in harshly.

“I don’t know how,” I hear myself saying, then I laugh as he exhales a soft chuckle. “I’ve never kissed a man.”

“Pretty sure it’s like kissing a woman,” he says against my mouth. “And I’ve seen you kiss plenty—”

I latch on to his bottom lip and suck. His eyes flare, and then his hungry mouth is on mine. My heart slams into my ribcage. My eyes stay open, watching his grow dark, lashes fluttering as he deepens the kiss. We keep our gazes locked as I slip my tongue into his mouth. Heat and male and something slightly astringent like liquor hits my tongue. I briefly wonder if he’s been drinking, but then Viper’s hand slips from my hip and travels slowly upward, fingers following each line and plane of my stomach, then chest until he weaves them into my hair and pulls me closer.

That simple, gentle move makes my entire body move toward him, my hands suddenly needing the feel of him. I place them on his biceps, fingers curling into the thick muscle. He emits a low groan and our tongues collide.

Everything about this is slow. Exploring. He feels so different. Women are soft, their kiss delicate and lined with desperation, but everything about them, even their desire, is smooth. Their flesh, their cheeks, and lips. Viper's mouth is hungry, verging on starved, yet his lips are so soft, it makes me crave him even more. But as the kiss grows more heated and his touch grows harsher, I feel the edge of sharpness in him. His soft lips are outlined with the scrape of stubble against my flesh. His nails biting into my scalp. Hard dick hitting my thigh.

"Shit," he breathes into my mouth, and I realize my eyes have closed as they pop open. He breaks the kiss, running his nose along my jawline to my neck. "You taste devine." At some point, my hands have made their way to the small of his back, my fingertips dipping into the dimples above his ass. "And you smell fucking good."

"Yeah. I smell like sweat and—"

"Sex," he grates. His tongue skates along my jaw. A sparking shiver runs down my spine, pooling like mercury. "When we fucked them, I smelled you on their skin. It makes me so hard, your sweat mixed with theirs. I can't get enough." He shifts closer, molding his bare chest to mine. My hands drop to his tight ass, feeling it flex as he grinds his dick into me. "I want to drink you in. Taste you. Drown in you."

A groan slips out, my head falling to the side as he drags his lips over my throat, down to my collarbone. *Shit*. It's no wonder Breaker has zero resistance when it comes to this man. I feel myself tumbling backward, falling into his sticky desire.

"Breaker smells like earth and cedar. Like a forest after it rains. You smell like everything clean and good, even when I've been told caving you is a sin. As if sin wasn't bad, but something created to leave us wanting."

My breath heaves from my lungs, the brutal honesty of his confession so raw it flays me. I grip his hair, pulling his head back, searching his eyes. "Who said this was sin?"

The word leaves him on an exhale. "Father."

I pull back, surprised. Fallon has never mentioned sexuality in any way. Good or bad. Then again, I've never been faced with wanting a man until recently.

"This isn't a sin," I whisper. "This wanting, this craving so deep it's in my marrow, this need to have all of you isn't bad. And if it is, I'll burn with you."

My words seem to rip something inside him, making his face go from desperation to soft need. I think it rips something free in me too because I feel that fear that's lived in me crumble. He must see it, because he cups my jaw with one hand, his thumb skimming my bottom lip.

"Let me touch you," he whispers. "Let me kiss you."

My fingers trail up his spine. "Yes."

And then it's just hot breaths and warm lips and nipping teeth. Hands in hair and the dragging of cock against cock. He shoves me backward. I pull him with me. He stumbles forward. My open pants slip down. I grip the waist keeping them up. Viper's hand slips under the waistband, gripping my ass. I keep him pressed to me as we move back into the room.

The back of my legs hit the bed. Viper's hand moves, and suddenly it's wrapped around my shaft. I groan into his mouth, pumping forward, suddenly so desperate for his touch that I think I'll die if he stops. My fingers weave into his silky hair as he slides his palm over my shaft under my pants. The calluses on his fingers, the softness of his lips are such a contrast it ignites my blood, making me feverish with want. I take him with me as I sit, Viper bending over to keep our mouths connected.

"Knees," I grate out, and *fuck*, he drops immediately. My cock grows so hard that every thought shifts from his delicious mouth on mine to my dick. I grip his throat, and his eyes flutter closed. "Suck it, now."

Desperation floods every sense, so that I'm fumbling with him to shove my pants down enough to free myself.

"God, your cock is fucking gorgeous," he grates, his hand wrapped around me at the root. Then he starts pumping, stroking, angling it to his mouth. Viper sucks my tip between his lips, licking the slit, and the groan that rips from my throat is unholy.

"Fucking suck it, hard," I rasp, my hips bucking toward him, the craving in me so primal it verges on violent. I shift up to my elbow to watch as he sucks the head, my fingers woven into his hair.

"Fuck, I've wanted this for so long," he says as our eyes collide once more. Whatever he sees in my face makes him grin. The silky, hot feel of his tongue slipping down the length of my cock feels like he's undoing a part of me, and my chest explodes when he grips me tighter, stroking roughly.

My head falls back between my shoulders, eyes closing as his hot mouth encloses over the head, then he takes me into his mouth. I grip his

hair and lift my hips, thrusting deeper.

"Watch your teeth," I grate, pulling out.

He gasps, saliva dripping down his chin. "I wasn't prepared." He licks the slit again, and I repeat the movement, but this time, my cock slides in smoothly until I hit his throat. He gags, eyes watering, and I let him go. He grips my hand in his hair and shoves it away. "Fucking let me do this, asshole."

My lip pulls into a grin, but I settle back on my elbows and watch as he takes me in again. Pleasure ripples down my spine every time he sucks, his cheeks hollowing out.

"Shit," I hiss out. "You're too good at this."

He grins around my shaft, and the arrogance makes me grasp his head and shove him down onto me hard. He chokes, and when his face grows red, I let him up. He lets me go with a slick *pop* and an angry glare, and I swear the universe just changed colors from black to royal blue.

"Come on, dirty boy," I say, voice gravelly. It doesn't even sound like mine. It's husky and bold. I feel bold. Confident in what I want. "Take my cock and suck it deep into that greedy mouth."

"Make me." Viper smirks, the taunt making my blood heat.

This is no longer an exploring of desires. This is want, in its purest, most animalistic form.

Pushing off the bed, I grip the sides of his head and slam him down onto my cock. I feel his throat constrict, the sharpness of his teeth. Feel his groan vibrate my through my shaft. It all just adds to the wild thrumming inside me. Gripping his hair, I pull him off me, and lean forward to capture his mouth, swallowing his gasp. His hand flexes on my dick.

"Any more cocky words, naughty boy?" I breathe into his mouth. "Or are you going to make me fuck that dirty mouth of yours and remind you of your place?"

His blue eyes flare with heat. Now I know why Breaker is so volatile around him. Viper brings forth something dark, primitive need to dominate and own.

Viper grinds out a moan. "Fuck, you're really sexy when you get all violent."

"Shut the fuck up and suck my cock like a good boy," I grate. Gripping my cock at the base, I use his hair to guide him to me. He smirks, then takes me so deep that I see stars.

Viper’s hand lands on my stomach and slips it upwards, pushing me back. I let myself fall to the bed and look at the ceiling as he sucks me in again. My eyes fall closed as I weave my fingers into his hair and just feel. His warm palms slipping up my abs, the tips of his fingers dipping into each hard plane, then moving down to cup my balls. It’s like he can’t touch enough of me, both of his hands exploring, leaving my dick to move over my exposed flesh, then up higher to pinch a nipple or run down my calf, over my pants, to grip my ankle then up again, all while he sucks, licks, and takes me deep.

Every soft touch, every dig of fingers makes me want more. I want him to touch me everywhere. Every time he sucks me in, it feels like he’s tugging at the seams of my body, exposing pieces I didn’t know I wanted free. The ravenous need to have his flesh against mine, his heat and his sweat and his fucking everything, until I can taste him too, eats me alive, until I’m pumping up into his mouth.

When it all becomes too much, my abs ripple, growing tight and I arch upwards, curling into myself. I find him watching my face through his long lashes. The second our eyes connect, he sucks hard, and my legs draw up around him, but he keeps his hands on my thighs as he sucks me, his head bobbing up and down. My cock hits his throat, and the world explodes in a flash of violent blue.

I stop existing and my world is just sounds and breaths and vibrant touches. I hear myself groaning his name, then heat erupts from me, and he chokes. I feel my fingers in his hair, weaving between the strands, feeling its softness and the sweat at the back of his neck. I hear the words spilling from my mouth, gravelly and unchecked, “*That’s good. Fuck, that’s good. That’s a good boy*,” followed by my panting, “*Oh, fuck, suck harder, swallow it all filthy boy.*”

When I come back down, that needy ache for more still lingers. To have him close. Closer. To own him. Possess him. Breathe the same air as him.

Pressing my palm to his shoulder, I shove Viper back, and he nearly falls to his ass, but catches himself. I grip under his arm and pull him upright until he’s standing over me. Still slightly dazed, my eyes travel up to his face. His lips gleam with the mess I made in his mouth, saliva and cum on his chin. He gathers it on his finger and slips it past his lips, sucking it clean.

“Fuck,” I breathe because *shit*, this man is dangerously sexy.

My eyes drop to the bulge in his fatigues. I reach for the buckle of his belt, but his hand clamps over mine before I can slip it free.

“You don’t have to,” he whispers.

My eyes lock with his. “I want to.”

His hand falls and I slip the belt open, then pop the button of his pants. My heart slams into my ribcage.

“Strike.”

“I want to,” I rasp, my heart hammering so hard that it feels like it may explode. “Don’t fucking say anything.”

“Okay.”

The grate of his zipper as I slide it down does something weird to my stomach. When I grip him, I’m amazed at how hot he feels, and so hard he’s pulsing. When I pull him free, he hisses and jerks in my grasp. Pre-cum leaks from him, and in some remote part of my brain, I know he’s this hard because of me.

Me now, taking him into my mouth. Licking the slit.

Musk and salt.

I run my tongue over my lips, my mind racing, deciding, and when it hits me that I want more, I lean in again, my fingers gripping him harder to guide him back to my mouth.

“Fucking shit,” he grates as my tongue slides over him, exploring the velvety tip. His fingers weave gently into my hair. “Fuck, yeah. God. Please don’t stop.”

The grating, desperate way he begs makes my chest grow and I lick again, my mind suddenly fracturing. “I don’t know how to do this,” I say, but I want to, desperately.

“Just like that—” His hips jerk. “—Fuck, man, like that. Like you’re sucking a lollipop.”

I try to remember the last I had a lollipop but can’t as I take him into my mouth fully. He’s girthy, and I have to open wide to take him. Viper groans when his cock pops out of my mouth. Our eyes meet, and his carnivorous look makes me want to do this better.

“I’m about to pass out,” he says with a laugh.

“What do I do?”

“Like our girls.”

I keep our gazed connected as I slip him past my lips, focusing the memory of how they feel as they take me into their mouths. How they pay attention to the head of my cock. I suck hard, tongue swirling around his tip. Viper erupts with a string of curses, touching my shoulder.

They lick the length of me, so I do that, coating his shaft with my spit. His lashes flutter, and a hand leaves my hair to caress my jaw.

“Shit. That’s good, Strike. Nice and sloppy. Suck it like you want my cum in your mouth.”

I suck him in hard, until he hits my throat. Viper’s groan is so feral I feel myself growing hard again.

“Harder. Less teeth.” He glides a hand to the base of his cock. “Jerk me off when you—” His hips buck and I gag. My eyes tear, but I keep him at my throat, then release him with a gasp.

“I’m about to fucking come,” he groans. “Mouth or face?”

I tap my chest as my cheeks hollow out when I take him in again, eyes pinned to his face. The greedy groan he lets out makes me suck harder, loving how his hips snap forward, and his jaw loosens and then tightens as he watches me.

“Oh shit,” his hips jerk, “*Mo ghràdh*, I’m about to come, I’m about to *come*.”

The last word gets caught on a groan as he pulls out and wet heat hits my neck. I lean back, letting his cum hit my chest as he spurts again, helping him through his release as I drag my hand down his length.

When he catches his breath, he collapses to the floor, his forehead hitting my knee.

“Shit,” he hisses.

I blink, taking a deep breath, waiting for the panic to hit. I’m surprised when it doesn’t.

Viper looks up at me, meeting my eyes. “Holy shit, Strike.”

Yeah.

I know.

I just sucked Viper’s dick.

“You okay?” he asks, standing upright. He backs away, snagging a towel from the bathroom, keeping his eyes locked on mine. He offers it to me, then makes a strange face before dropping back down to a crouch and swiping it over my chest. His cum smears across my skin, catching in the hair.

Now I panic.

My heart thunders. I shove his hand away, snatching the towel, and try to swipe at the cum stuck in the thin line of hair that leads to my open pants.

Where my dick *still* sticks out.

Shit.

Shit.

Shit.

“Striker.” His voice breaks through the loud noise in my head. “God, your face.’” He laughs, grabbing the towel and tossing it aside. “You’re freaking the fuck out.”

I nod. Yeah, bad.

He grips my hand. Sucks my fingers past his lips. The whirling panic slams to a stops a my attention shifts from the ruthless unease coiling inside me to his hot mouth. He releases them with a seductive *pop*. My cock grows thicker. He leans forward and nips my stomach.

“Okay,” I say, stifling a surprised chuckle. “You have my attention.”

A wolfish grin turns the corner of his mouth upward when he turns his face up to me. “You think our girl wants to play?”

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Chapter 32

Delilah

CORA WAS TAKEN SIX days ago. I tell myself over and over that Breaker is with her, at least in some capacity, and he'll keep her safe, but it feels empty.

From the reports he's been sending the men all week, which they've relayed to me, he's having to use their old surveillance system to keep an eye on her which I was informed consisted of cameras outside our homes, the office, and the parking garages at our condo's.

That conversation has yet to happen. About how long they watched us. I think part of me doesn't want to know. It would mean that everything I've done since their brother was murdered—my short lived marriage, filing for divorce, my pathetic nights spent alone at my condo crying over Dave who never deserved me—was all cataloged and witnessed.

I knew, in an abstract way they kept an eye on us so they could take us, but the reality is unsettling.

As is the fact I slept with them.

And want to again.

It doesn't help they are avoiding me, only communicating during practice, then leaving me alone in the evenings and at night. Like we didn't share some primal claiming of flesh a week ago. Viper's refusal, and Striker's obvious irritation hurts, but it's Reaper's blatant avoidance of me that claws at my ego. I know I was the one who told him not to touch me again, but the fact he's listening grates on my nerves.

In the last week, Reaper and I have been in the same space a total of five times. Once in his room. The second my first day of target practice. The third and fourth when they had me lifting weights, and the fifth was just a few days ago when I stabbed Viper in the balls.

Other than that, nothing.

And that nothing, I find, is lonely.

I turn the shower off and grab the towel, drying quickly, then wrapping it around myself as I step from the bathroom. The fire in the hearth blazes, and the radiator pops and fizzes.

Striker.

I'm pretty sure it's him coming into my room to light the fire and turn up the radiator while I'm downstairs with Viper training after our morning lesson. Although today we didn't practice, so I'm not sure when he had the time to light the fire.

Instead of taking me to the range, he left to shower saying I had the morning off. After waiting in the large empty room near the back of the house for Viper, who never showed, I figured they have given up on me, and wandered around the mansion, opening doors.

Most of the doors remain locked, but a few were open, revealing empty rooms, or ones stuffed with old furniture covered in white sheets. After I explored enough I wandered to the kitchen and ate the food left out for me, wondering when they're going to talk to me about why they are training me, and what exactly I'm training for. When none of them appeared, I went back up to my room to shower.

I know they're giving me space, and maybe I need it, but it feels like we've returned to the time before that night in the library but this time I'm utterly alone. And I don't know how to turn my mind off.

I keep picturing Cora being hurt, then my mind fills with the images of her getting fucked so beautifully right next to me and I don't understand why not even Striker is coming to me at night. Everything with him, them, is strict. I don't get any more kisses from Striker. It's like Cora took his softness when she was sent away. Viper hasn't said a word to me about the time in his room. Reaper…

The man oozes sexual tension but other than a few comments, he's like a personal trainer instead of…

Whatever he is to me. Whatever they are to me.

To us. Cora and I.

I miss Cora. Her even breathing as I sleep, or how she'd roll over in the night seeking me out for warmth and comfort. I'm also worried sick.

She was hurt so much, right under my nose and no one knew. What will happen to her now there's no one to protect her? Breaker can only do so much without actually stealing her away again and since they seem to be waiting to act until I'm ready for my part in this, he's just a shadow.

Clyde I know would do his best, but Rune…

I sit at the end of the bed, then lie back, pressing the backs of my hands to my eyes. *Don't cry. Don't cry.* Tears will do her no good. I just need to focus. They want me training so it's obvious *when* they send me back they want me to be able to defend myself. Reaper told me I had to be prepared.

The wooden floorboards outside my door groan, cutting off all thoughts. I sit upright, gripping the towel to my chest, heart thundering. The floor creaks again, and goose bumps rise on my arms. This old house settles every time the wind blows too hard, but I know the sound of footsteps.

My eyes drop to the doorknob. It twists slowly. My stomach knots as I watch the knob turn. The door swings open slow enough that my heart hammers in anticipation. Light from the hallway window behind him frames his body in pale light. Black pants, no shirt, his mask over his face.

No shirt.

My stomach does a little flip, excitement and anxiousness making me realize I get aroused and a little scared every time they appear because I never know what I'm going to get.

Striker pauses mid-stride when he sees me on the bed, the towel clutched to my chest.

"Why are you wearing your mask?" I ask, panic zipping through me, my heart racing for an entirely different reason. He's only put it back on when his father appeared. "Is he back?"

Striker shakes his head and I notice the black rope draped over his bare shoulders. I open my mouth to ask why he has rope, but then Viper walks into the room.

Shirtless.

My gasp is audible.

Viper's a large man, a wall of muscle and power. I've seen the perfect cut of his lower abs, that lickable V that leads to is dick. His thick forearms. But seeing him shirtless is like looking upon a work of art.

“What are you doing?” I pant, out of breath at just the sight of him. I shift to sit on my knees, eating up every muscle and shadowed curve of his chest. He’s smooth everywhere but for a light patch of hair on his pecs, slightly bronze in color. Almost gold in the late morning light streaming in through the windows. A light dusting of freckles scatters his fair-skinned broad shoulders and muscled forearms. He has the same sketch-like tattoo of five black skulls on his chest that Striker and Reaper have, the fifth one with crossed off with a slash.

The loss of their brother, I realize. My breath heaves from my lungs remembering the carvings in Reaper’s room. The one on Striker’s dresser.

He was their family. Like Cora is to me. That same heart-wrenching feeling I had when I found out Rune was hurting her makes tears sting my eyes.

“Princess,” Striker says, his tone talking that soft, mildly concerned ring he gets when he knows I’m overwhelmed, and my eyes dart to him, but snag on the rope. Viper shifts next to him, and I catch sight of the black, silky material he used to blindfold me in the dining room in his large hand.

They were coming to me.

For me.

My heart skips, the reality that they were coming for me with the intention of tying me up and doing who knows what with me, making me dizzy.

Looks like you got what you wanted.

“Where’s Reaper?” I breathe, the thought of being with them again waking up that dark, primitive thing inside me.

Striker’s thumb skates over my lip. Sparks ignite under where his flesh meets mine. “He’ll come when he’s ready, pretty girl.”

If I try to name this hollow feeling in my chest, I know it would be disappointment. He’s avoiding me. My anger toward him maybe wasn’t as justified as it felt, but his utter refusal to spend time with me hurts.

“Come here, Sweetheart. Look at our girl.” Viper pulls a black phone from his pocket and turns the screen toward me. My gaze settles on the screen. That ache in my chest breaks, and tears spring to my eyes.

Our girl.

She’s mine and theirs.

And she’s okay.

“Breaker sent this picture this morning,” Striker says, tucking a damp strand of hair behind my ear as I lean in to look closely at the image.

She’s so beautiful, framed in gold light, hair blazing with fire highlights, splayed out on a creamy pillow case. The corner of her mouth is lifted in a grin, and she looks content. Her eyes look a little haunted but she’s okay.

She’s okay.

“She’s with him?” I ask as Viper tucks his phone away. “How?”

The two men exchange a look then Striker says, “Things have been set into motion.”

“What does that mean?” I ask moving to a kneeling position on the bed, gripping the towel over my breasts with a clenched fist. Hope springs to life in my chest. “Does that mean I’ll go back soon?”

The two men glance at each other.

“I’ve been doing what you’ve asked,” I point out. “I’m training for whatever it is you want. I’ve been—“ I was about to say a good girl, but I stop myself.

My head is completely fucked.

“Oh, Sweetheart,” Viper coos. “You have been a good girl haven’t you?” Viper drops the material on the bed next to me as he drags a finger along my jawline. “Our girl has listened to everything we’ve said and been working so hard.”

My cheeks heat, knowing he’s not just referring to this past week of practice but also to the day in his room.

“She has been,” Striker says, taking a step closer to both me and Viper at his side. They are so different from each other. Striker’s muscled yet tall and slightly leaner, with warmly tanned skin where Viper is so fair, with light freckles and he’s just fucking huge, stocky and cut like a wrestler. “We’ve been so focused on your training, Princess, we’ve neglected you, haven’t we?”

Viper inches even closer, so their arms brush. My gaze snags on the way they’re touching, remembering how the last time we were together, Viper jerked Striker off while Cora was on her knees before him. The memory creates a slick heat between my thighs.

Striker’s velvety voice cracks though my thoughts. “I think our Princess needs some attention.”

“Have you missed us?” Viper asks, thumb hooking in a belt loop. The outline of his dick trapped in his pants is obvious and so tight it looks uncomfortable. Like he can read my thoughts, or the fact I’m staring has him gripping the waistband of his fatigues. He pulls them away from his body, abs rippling as he slides a hand in his pants and repositions his hard length. I don’t bother looking away.

In fact, I feel a smirk forming.

“I think the way she’s fucking you with her eyes says she’s missed us,” Striker says making my eyes drag up to his. The gold color flares with fiery heat, and something else, something slightly darker like that night in the club when they were there to claim us before they even took us.

My gaze drops to his hand as he grips the waistband of his pants. My pussy clenches. He backs way. Pops the button. “Lie down. Feet on the edge.”

The shift from his warm tone to this hard command sends electric through my blood. It’s suddenly too hard to breathe. His zipper grates down.

“Come on *mo leannan*, lie back.“ Viper grips his pants and slowly, teasingly, he undoes the button, hand pausing when it comes to his zipper. Like he’s waiting for me to listen before continuing.

I sit down, inching forward, then place my feet on the edge of the bed, as I lean back. The towel falls between my thighs, covering me. I let my legs fall open slightly watching as Viper frees himself. If I listen I get rewarded. And I want them so bad, I’ve wanted them again so much, that craving knitted up so tight in my belly, that I lean back on both elbows, feeling the towel loosen slightly over my breasts.

Striker steps up next to him and my lungs deflate as I watch him free his hard cock. He strokes himself, slowly, lewdly, putting on a show for me.

They both are.

Stroking themselves for me.

Striker’s long fingers touch my knee. My eyes flicker up to his masked face. “Open for me. Let us see.”

My legs fall open easily, before he’s even finished talking. Striker pulls the towel aside, tugging until it falls open completely.

The groan Viper emits makes me want to please them. I take my lower lip between my teeth, watching him look at me, then my gaze drops lower as he takes a long stroke down his thick cock. He’s so hard, pre-cum

glistens on his slit. Every single fiber in my being wants to sit up, and lick that fat head, lap the salty, earthy drop from him.

My gaze shifts to Striker, his thick delicious cock is leaking for me.

They both are.

The feeling is heady. These two powerful men, desperate for me.

Like he can feel the need blooming inside me, Viper pushes my knee down , opening my legs wider. My cheeks flame from how exposed I am, but desire ticks up, growing hotter with the way his eyes drift over my naked flesh.

“You want these cocks, Princess?” Striker asks, matching Vipers rough strokes. As his hand slides up, Viper’s does as well, and when they reach the tips they both roll their palms over the head, gathering pre-cum and using it coat their length.

My pussy throbs at the sight, and that deep, dark need rushes to the surface of my skin, heating it.

“What do you want, Princess?” Striker says, his voice throaty with desire.

Them. Striker, Viper. I want Reaper here too.

How did this even happen? How have I let it?

“*Shhhh*,“ Striker whispers. “You’re getting caught in your head, Princess.”

Viper moves in closer, his hot, slick tip hitting the inside of my leg. “You want this cock, *mo leannan*? Show me where you want it.”

My pussy throbs and they both look down to the space between my thighs. I spent a week wanting them, and they’re forcing me to admit it. That dark, needy place they carved out for them aches to be touched. To feel their whispered worships against my skin. To have them again, like before, filling me up their promises, their attention, and their desire so that I don’t feel empty.

Because that’s what they have given me. Everything I’ve ever wanted. My father protected me to the point of drowning me in his power. I wasn’t touched unless Rune approved. I’ve craved this type of attention, this type of desire and I’m getting it from them, right now.

I prop myself on one elbow, and my other hand moves lower, that desire for them growing hotter and hotter as they both focus on my hand. I place a finger delicately on my clit.

“So pretty,” Viper says, tugging along his shaft. “Is that were you ache?”

I bite my lip. Striker, groans as I circle the nub. I nod.

“Show us how to make it feel better.”

I squeeze my eyes closed. I’ve never touched myself in front of anyone, but with the way they’re looking at me, I feel like a goddess, so I widen my legs and circle my clit, dipping my finger to my opening to gather wetness.

“Fuck,” Striker hisses. “Again.”

I repeat the movement. It’s almost obscene, how wet I am. I can feel it dripping down to my ass crack and all I’m doing is watching them stroke themselves.

“What do you think about when you touch that pretty clit?” Viper asks, giving his dick a harsh stroke.

“You,” I say, because I do. “All of you.”

“Naughty thing,” Striker grates. “You play with your little clit and thing about us?”

“Yes,” I say, feeling braver. Powerful under their wolfish eyes.

“Us doing what?” Viper asks. “With our fingers or our mouths?”

My answer leaves in an exhale. “Both.”

“Eating your pussy?”

I nod

“Fingering you?”

I add another finger, using two to circle my clit as I add more pressure.

“Do you think about us fucking you?” Striker asks.

“All the time.”

“Filthy girl,” Viper says, approvingly. “In your ass or pussy?”

My eyes lock with his. “Both.”

I swear he’s smiling.

“You want my cock in your ass?” Viper says and it sounds so crass when he says it with a witness that my stomach dips. I’m grateful he’s never said anything and right now it feels like our dirty little secret. How I begged him. And instead of teasing me, which is what I’d expect him to do, he’s bringing it up as a question. Maybe he knew how desperate I was, not just physically but emotionally. “You want me fucking your tight ass, while Striker fucks your pretty cunt?”

The image that sentence forms sends a rush of wetness between my legs. The ache grows.

“Come here,” Striker says, gripping my hand on my pussy and pulling me upright. “You’re going to get everything you want, but if I don’t get your mouth on me right now, I’d going to fucking die.”

My knees hit the cold hardwood floor. He doesn’t have to ask or command. With lips already parted, my tongue out, waiting, Striker guides his cock to my open mouth and slips in. Salt and musk and him. My groan verges on animalistic as I look up at his masked face, my skin flushing with heat. His head falls back, and he groans. Viper pumps himself harder, his free hand into Striker’s pants and gripping his ass. The sight just sends me higher.

I grasp Striker and pump him hard as I suck and lick and fist Viper’s thick cock in my other hand. I let Striker’s cock pop from my mouth and lean over to take Viper. Both men shift, angling their hips. Strikers cock hits the corner of my mouth and I let Viper go to pay attention to him. When I release him, both hard lengths slick with my saliva slip over one another, and the sights so erotic, so perfect, that I keep the heads of their cocks pressed together as I pump, taking a long, slow licks over both of them. There’s no way I can get them both in my mouth, but I desperately want to. Take them both into me and feel them moving.

“Fuck,” Viper says. “If you keep that up, I’m going to come too soon, Sweetheart.”

Striker backs away and pulls his mask off.

My heart tumbles in my chest. He’s so incredibly beautiful.

He sits on the edge of the bed, then lies back, feet planted on the floor as he pulls me to him. I climb up, already leaning down to take his mouth, straddling his hips. I delve my tongue into his hot mouth, not even giving him the chance to order me but he taps my ass and says, “Not yet, greedy girl.” He grins as I back away, tapping his bottom lip. “I want you on my cock, Princess, but first you’re going to sit here.”

My brows knit. I open my mouth to ask how I’m supposed to do that when it hits me.

His face.

He wants me to sit on his face.

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Chapter 33

Delilah

SITTING ON STRIKER'S FACE has definitely been a part of my shower fantasies, but when I'm confronted with the reality, I'm suddenly nervous. I feel my head shaking, telling him no, but he's gripping my hips and dragging me up. I fall forward on hands and knees, all too aware of Viper behind me.

"Be a good girl," Striker says, kissing the inside of my thigh as he positions himself under me. He lifts his head from the bed, placing a soft kiss to my folds. My fingers curl into the bedding, my back bowing to give him better access just as Viper's hand lands on my ass cheeks, kneading the flesh.

"God, that's fucking sexy." Viper grips my shoulder pulling me upright.

The position allows Striker better access and when I feel the slick heat of his tongue right before he sucks me into his mouth, an electric current shoots through my core. I shudder, reaching behind me to clutch at Viper's hand, searching for anything to keep me grounded as Striker devours me.

Striker's guttural groan from between my thighs makes that heat pooling in my core turn molten.

"God, I love watching you eat pussy," Viper says. "Gets me so hard. That's it, fuck my hand. I'm going to make this cock feel so good while you eat our girl."

The dirty words pouring from Viper's mouth makes me cast a look over my shoulder. Viper's large hand fists Striker's cock, stroking him roughly. The sight of his hand on him, Striker bucking into each stroke combined with the wet licks to my pussy is so carnal that I grind down onto his face, weaving a hand through his hair, loving his grating moan.

"Why isn't Reaper here?" I ask, the words leaving my mouth in a rush.

My answer is a hard, long lick to my center, and I shiver. Striker pulls back long enough to say, "Mouth on my cock and suck it like a dirty boy."

My breath rushes out as I shift to look, angling my body to see. When Viper leans forward, lifting his mask to expose his lush lips and takes Striker into his mouth, I groan. Striker lets out a strangled sound, fingers digging harshly into my thighs, and sucks my folds between his lips, nipping lightly at the flesh.

This is the first time I've seen Striker and Viper together and they're both so sexy, so feral in their need that the thought of them both in me shoots my own desire up even higher.

"Oh fuck," I hiss, looking back down at Striker, that wild feeling in me growing. "That's so fucking sexy."

Striker's licks and sucks grow hungrier, his tongue moving over me, into me with such desire I'm meeting him, the stiffness in my legs leaving and I'm rubbing my pussy on his face, as Viper sucks his thick length with wet sloppy sounds.

Striker's gasp nearly sends me over. My fingers tighten in his hair.

He releases me, eyes opening to meet mine. "Good girl. Fuck my face. Take what you want."

Behind me, I feel movement, and the bed dips. Viper's warm chest meets my back, his hand snaking around to my throat. My head falls back to his shoulder, his dick slipping between my crack.

Striker groans, his body jerking upwards, his hands traveling up my thighs to my stomach. "Don't fucking stop," he rasps. "Keep stroking my cock, as you fuck her."

"Lean forward," Viper says, breath fanning my ear through his mask. "Let me in your little pussy first."

I fall forward onto my hands, and it changes the angle of Striker's mouth so now he's just sucking on my clit, sending stars and firelight

zinging through my blood.

Viper's cock nudges at my entrance. He enters me slowly, carefully, as Striker sucks me into his mouth, pulling hard on my clit. When Viper pulls out, I feel Striker's hot tongue sliding over my entrance, licking both of us as Viper moves in and out gently.

"Fuck," Striker groans. "You both taste so good."

Vipers thumb presses into the tight hole at my backside and slips in. I gasp, rocking back onto him, dark need coiling inside me too tight. Striker releases me and holds his tongue out for me, like I do him, letting me drag my pussy over it. The thought he's letting me take from him dials up that primal need. The sensation of his tongue over me, Viper moving in and out slowly, his finger in my ass matching pace, has my chest expanding, my breaths hitching on feral groans.

Their hands roam all over. A finger in my ass, Striker's fingers gliding all over, Viper's reaching around to play with my nipples. When Striker starts licking and sucking again, I groan loudly, my movements growing wild, desperate as Striker sucks, licks, his tongue slicking between Viper's cock and my pussy, devouring us like a man starved.

My release sneaks up on me, and I shatter so suddenly, so completely I cry out, grinding down on his mouth, even as Viper picks up pace and fucks me through it.

I collapse forward onto my elbows, breaths heaving from my lungs as Vipers slips out.

"God that was fucking perfect," Viper says.

With deep breaths, I blink, the room coming back into focus. "Shit," I say as Viper's finger leaves my tight hole, and I sit upright, falling back onto Striker's chest. I look down between my legs. "Are you okay?"

Striker's grin, lips wet from my release, looks purely feral. He lifts his head and kisses my inner thigh, before he grips my hips, forcing me to my move down his body. When his cock hits my ass he groans.

"I'm wonderful," he says, leaning up on one elbow. "I could eat your pretty pussy all day."

Desire races through me. I reach between us and guide him to my opening, so desperate for more, that my mind, my body, is nothing but hungry want.

"That's it." Viper's hands land on my hips. "Fuck his gorgeous cock while I play with your ass."

Lowering myself onto him, we both groan as he stretches me, my pussy soaked. Striker grips the back of my neck and pulls me down to his mouth. I taste myself and my neediness that's not waiting for them to tell me what they want. I'm taking from them.

Viper's cock hits my ass crack. "Hold still, Sweetheart," Viper says. "I'm going to cover your eyes." The blindfold lowers, slick slipping over me, and he ties it at the back.

Like that day in the dining room, my world is now just sensations. Warm hands moving all over me. Striker's thick cock stretching me perfectly. His hungry mouth on mine.

Viper grips my shoulder, and I feel his lips skim my back, moving up my neck, his cock slipping over my ass.

"Stay just like that, *mo leannan*," he whispers, "Keep your hands on the bed like a good girl, and I won't tie you up."

My fingers curl into the bed, clinging to the few fragments left of myself they haven't possessed as I greedily move up and down Striker's cock, grinding down on him to take him all the way, loving the pinch of pain that bleeds through the pleasure.

"Oh, fuck, yes. Ride my cock, Princess," Striker grates. "Be our perfect, filthy little slut and take what you want."

"This gorgeous ass is going to feel so good," Viper says as his finger slips back into my tight hole. I hear something click, like a bottle cap and all my attention snaps from the feel of Striker, to Viper at my back and his fingers slipping over my tight hole.

I'm really about to do this.

"Ride his cock, Sweetheart." Viper's finger drives back into me, moving in deeper than before.

My groan would be embarrassing if I wasn't so greedy for more.

"You're dick is so hard, Strike," Viper says. "I can't wait until we're both fucking her and I can feel your huge cock inside her."

"Fuck," Striker curses. "I'm not going to last long. Stretch her ass, Vipe. I want to feel you in her."

On command, Viper slowly inserts another finger. I freeze, my breath hitching at the intrusion.

"Relax, Sweetheart. Keep riding his cock." Lips press to my spine. "I'm going to add another in a minute. I need you relaxed, and I promise it'll feel good."

Each slow drive of his fingers in my ass sends an erotic spark to my clit. I pick up pace again, heat coiling up tightly in my belly, riding Striker while Viper fucks my ass with two fingers.

“Play with your pussy, Princess,” Striker grates, hands digging into my hips.

I wish I could see his face. See how good this feels for him. I prop myself on one hand and reach between us, circling my clit as instructed. Fire ignites at just the light touch and I press harder.

“Ready, Sweetheart?”

“Fuck, I’m not,” Striker says, breaths heavy, voice strangled. “She’s already so tight.”

“You feel me rubbing your dick inside her?” Viper asks, his own voice husky with desire. Viper’s fingers move deeper. There’s intense pressure. My pussy clenches. Striker moans.

“Shit,” he curses. Inside me, I feel his cock throb, Viper’s finger’s pressing my inner walls. Striker grips my hips lifting me off him, and I whine at the loss. “I need a minute.”

“Get that pretty ass up,” Viper says, and I feel him move closer. His fingers slip out. There’s movement and that clip sound again. Fabric moving. Fingers weave into my hair.

“Come here, Princess. Keep rubbing that clit and kiss me.” And then Striker’s mouth is on mine, driving his tongue past my lips.

I feel slickness at my back hole and pressure. My heart kicks in my chest. I angle my ass higher. One large hand spreads my ass.

“Relax, Sweetheart. I got you. I’m going to inch in with just the tip and pull out okay?”

I exhale my *yes* into Strikers mouth. I want them so bad that I’m angling my ass higher, my breasts slipping over Striker’s bare chest, heart hammering against his, that fiery desperation lighting up my blood.

His dick nudges my rear and pushes, the hand on my hip flexing, fingers dipping to curve around to my lower belly.

“Shit.” I grind my teeth at the slight sting. I feel him slip in, the pressure making me tense and then we all stop moving. I exhale in rush, the sensation of his dick barely in my ass a combination of slight pain and pleasure.

“Fuck,” Viper grates. I hiss a curse of my own. Striker says, “That’s my good girl. Let him in that tight ass so we can fuck you the way you

need.”

“Oh god,” Viper breathes out heavily, hot and harsh on my back. My pussy clenches on nothing. Then he slips out. His forehead hits my upper back. I feel slick sweat over warm skin, telling me his mask is off. “Okay, I’m going to do that again but this time, you push back onto me.”

I nod. My blood singing. It’s broad daylight, and this feels so sinful. So right. Viper presses his cock to my back hole again and slips the tip in. We all stay still and breath.

“Come here,” Striker says. With just Vipers tip in my ass, Striker devours my mouth, moving his hand over mine to play with my clit.

“Push back, *mo leannan*,“ Viper says. “Slowly. Yeah, like that. *Fu-ck*, just like that.”

I stop moving, the sting too intense.

“Push back,” Viper says. “Bare down, and it’ll feel better once you get past the initial sting.”

It takes me a minute to realize what he means and when I bear down as I push back, he slips in slowly. My muscles tighten, and the sting tears a gasp from my throat, but then I do it again and it feels like it all just gives, and he slips in deeper.

“Fuck,” Viper says. “Fuck, fuck. Oh God, beautiful girl, your ass is going to be the death of me.”

I stiffen at the intrusion, feeling full and like I may—

Fingers brush hair from my face. “Start to move,” Strikers says. “Until you feel good.

Taking my bottom lip between my teeth, I move.

“Just like that,” Viper grates. “Your ass is so perfect.” A light slap to my ass cheek makes me jolt, but the sting fades and I realize he’s moved deeper.

Another slap to my rear and I start to move a little more. Then I’m slowly moving, the sting fading, changing, blooming into a pleasurable heat.

“*Oh*, fuck,“ I breathe, my voice unrecognizable, husky and low as my body lights up, every other part of me feeling empty and needy as my body adjusts.

“Come here.” Warm fingers in my hair, Striker’s mouth on mine. “Fuck his cock, Princess. Make him scream your name.”

I rock back onto Viper, loving the strangled sounds he's making. How his head drops to my back and he's starting to move a little with me, meeting me, but letting me control this. His hand digs into my hip, like he's hanging on for dear life.

"Hold still," Striker says, and I stop rocking. He pulls me to his chest, and I feel his cock nothing at my entrance. "Give me that pussy, Princess. Open for me."

When he first slips the head of his cock into me, I gasp, burying my face in his neck breathing him in. "You're not going to fit."

"Relax," Striker says. "Let me in."

His tip slips in even more and the sound I make is feral, ripping from that wild woman inside me. Striker takes his time, working back into me as Viper makes animalistic groans, but remains perfectly still. Then they're both seated inside me, and I feel so full, tears sting my eyes.

With every breath, I feel them so fully inside me, it's overwhelming. I'm truly possessed in this moment, owned by both of them. Viper starts to move and Striker's moan sets me on fire. I weave my fingers into his hair, my body going slack, and just feel. Striker's soft movements into me from below, Viper's slow gentle strokes into my ass. How they're both delicately trailing fingers over my skin, cherishing every inch of me.

This isn't rough or demanding. They aren't pulling desire from me, ripping my pleasure out with every thrust. This is Striker, gently caressing the back of my head, pressing his lips to my cheek, his ragged breaths in my ear. Viper, stroking fingers up and down my spine. Lips on my shoulder, his hot chest to my back then a hand weaving into my hair. They're giving me pleasure, not taking, allowing me to control the depth, the speed, matching me, meeting me.

My chest expands. Tears sting my eyes, dampening my mask.

I feel their promises in every gentle stroke. In every touch and press of lips. Every hot breath skating across my skin, another promise.

I'm theirs.

Mine.

"Yes, Princess, yours."

Large hands cup my breasts. A soft press of lips to my shoulder. "Oh, *mo leannan*, we're yours. You're ours and we're never letting go."

A deep craving grows in my chest, heat pools softly in my belly. I'm made of just hot breaths and sweaty skin, them inside me, filling up all the

empty spaces. The only things I hear are the slick wet sounds of them moving into me, and our ragged breathing. The bed squeaking. My desperation courses in my veins like brilliant gems.

I grip the bedding, suddenly overcome with want and rock back into Viper, forcing him to fuck my ass harder.

“Shit.” Viper grunts. “Oh, fuck yes, Sweetheart. Take it. Harder.” His hips jerk, starting to move faster with me. “Fuck, Strike, your cock feels so good rubbing my dick.”

“You’re both going to make me come so hard.” Striker’s hot groan fans the side of my face. “You take our cocks so well, Princess.”

“I’m going to fill this ass up,” Viper says, words scraping free, hewn from jagged wood and heating my back.

All the hands on me tighten. I feel them both thicken, and I feel so impossibly full, heat blooming, scalding, turning to liquid. Blood roaring in my ears.

Faintly I’m aware of Viper’s filthy praises.

Good girl, fuck me with that prefect ass.

That’s right, use me, Sweetheart.

Striker’s barely contained groans as he juts his hips upward, burying himself so deep I feel him in the fabric of my being.

Then I’m nothing. Everything else but them inside me ceases to exist as pleasure claws through my mind like shattered glass, each shard a different sensation. Heat floods me. Groans erupt, a primal scream tearing from me as everything in me rips apart and I give myself over to them and this pleasure rippling through my body.

Heat floods me, filling me everywhere, throbbing an pulsing as they come indie me.

Then it’s just us panting, Viper across my back, pressing me into Striker’s chest, his forehead rocking on my shoulder. Striker’s heavy breaths in my ear. When we catch our breaths Viper slips out and pulls me off of Striker. I’m turned over onto my back. Too weak to move, I let them do with me as they please. Striker pulls my arms above my head, pinning them to the bed. Large hands part my thighs, pushing them up and open. A hot mouth encloses over my pussy, tongue parting me. I jerk at the feeling, too limp to do anything but surrender to the tongue lapping at Striker’s cum spilling from me.

“Eat her until she’s clean,” Striker says. Teeth graze my nipple. “Fuck, Viper. You’re a filthy boy.”

His answering groan vibrates through my clit. Another long, deep lap, then his tongue is inside me.

“Eat my cum from her tight pussy,” Striker rasps. “Show our girl how much you love the mess I make of her.”

It’s too much. Too many sensations. Being held down, the essence of me, of Striker’s release, being pulled, licked, consumed makes my head thrash, and I fight Striker’s tight grasp, but he doesn’t let me move. Viper doesn’t relent, even when I fight his hands on my thighs by trying to close my thighs, when I beg him to stop because I’m too sensitive, too overcome with emotions and my body feels too hot and lit up.

“I can’t,” I whimper. “I can’t.”

“Give him another, Princess.”

“I can—“ I scream out another release. Striker holds my hands to the bed as he eats my every whimper with a hungry kiss.

They release me, and my legs fall bonelessly to the bed. Striker gathers me up, pressing kisses to my cheeks as he lifts me. I sag against him as he sets me down. My bare feet hit cold tile. I hear drawers being opened and the rustling of blankets.

My cheeks flame, realizing Viper’s cleaning himself and probably the bed.

Striker lets me go and I hear a door shut. I pull my mask off and catch his smirk, highlighted by the tungsten light of the bathroom vanity.

He cups my cheeks, gold eyes searching my face, running his thumbs over my burning cheeks. “This is quite a blush. If you’re embarrassed, worrying about a mess, then let me say it was absolute filthy.”

I wince.

“You, Princess, are such a dirty little girl, taking two cocks.” His lips press to mine, and I swear to god my heart stops from the way his lips pull into a devilish grin as he backs away. “You’re so perfect. Even if you’re a terrible shot.”

A scoff breaks free, then a laugh, my eyes dropping to his chest, because I am. Really bad.

Striker hooks a finger under my chin, tilting my head back. My eyes meet his and what I see there melts me. Flays me alive.

Mine.

He is mine.

They are *mine*.

“I just need more practice,” I whisper, never wanting that look to leave his eyes. Approval. Appreciation. Complete adoration. “I’ll do better.”

“Don’t you worry, Princess, you’re going to be beautifully deadly by the time we’re done with you.”

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Chapter 34

Cora

PART OF ME CAN'T believe he's left me alone in this warehouse full of their secrets, but he had little choice. I need something besides a torn gown and heels to wear. When Breaker heard my stomach growl, he said he'd be back and to wait down here, on the main floor, while he was gone.

Thirty minutes, he'd said. That's how long it would take to run to the store.

So that's how long I have to snoop.

Last night, Breaker showed me their surveillance room, his bedroom, and the spacious open area on the first floor where I currently stand. As soon as I hear the roar of Breaker's motorcycle fade away, I rush back upstairs to explore the other rooms, heart hammering with nerves. Disappointment crashes through the adrenaline rush when I find they are locked except for a small closet stocked with linens and cleaning supplies and a compact bathroom equipped with an old toilet and rusted sink. When I see the toothpaste, I squeeze some onto my finger and use it to clean my teeth as best I can, rummaging through the containers lined up neatly on the metal storage shelves. Inside are random bars of white soap, razors, and shaving cream. No medicines or weird creams for rashes to show they are human and not super soldiers made of just muscles and sex.

When I find nothing of value in the little bathroom, I step back out into the hall. I hold Breaker's oversized shirt to my nose, breathing in his clean, slightly earthy scent, like almonds and cedar. My gaze darts along the

doors lining the wall, moving to the two at the far end. I know trying to pick the locks is a bad idea. First and foremost, I don't even have anything to use for picking, and second, I have no clue how, so I make my way back downstairs.

And find the kitchen. Or at least a room that looks like one. There's a refrigerator, a large sink, and a long metal counter. In one corner sits a modern range, looking out of place. I realize that this must have been a cafeteria for the factory workers, and they added the range and fridge when they decided to use this as their base for collecting intel.

Stalk, Cora. They stalked you.

The fridge is empty, like it was cleaned out—probably right before they took us because they knew they wouldn't return for a while— and the counters and long table with folding chairs are clean.

The whole place is clean, including the large open room with the TV. Besides the rusted metal beams, the painted black metal and concrete walls, and the round rusted holes in the floor from where the factory machinery was bolted down, the place is tidy and homey.

As comfortable as a bachelor pad can be.

My fingers glide along the bookcase, taking in the titles of classic and fantasy books, the old black-and-white DVD movies, and a few CDs of random bands from the 90s. The massive TV on the far wall is flanked by new video game consoles, which is about the only thing in the place that fits the fact that four men live here.

What strikes me most is the lack of personal items. No photos on the fridge, no liquor bottles lined up, or sports memorabilia displayed. Besides the books and old movies, this place could belong to any group of men from any walk of life and age range. It's disconcerting, considering the elaborate surveillance equipment upstairs.

Maybe the men took their belongings with them? I never dared search for their rooms while in the mansion. I knew better. They'd tell me who they were and what they wanted when ready.

My belly flutters, thinking about Reaper's promise. Viper's. Striker's.

Breaker.

The roar of an engine fills my ears, signaling Breaker's return. A loud rattling echoes in the space as the bay door slides upward. Breaker's

bike engine revs, and he slowly guides it to the back of the factory. He effortlessly dismounts and removes his helmet, setting it down on the seat.

As he removes his black mask, he strides towards me with intense focus, sending heat to my core. I can't deny how good the all-black riding gear looks on him, perfectly hugging his tall, muscular frame. Everything looks good on him: tuxes, black fatigues, a white undershirt shirt and black pants.

Stark naked with water dripping off him.

He's mouthwatering gorgeous, and he's currently walking toward me with a smile on his beautiful, innocent-looking face. I'd have never guessed that he looked like a runway model—an absolute work of art. The fact that neither Delilah nor I ever noticed him as he watched us speaks volumes about his ability to remain unnoticed.

This gives me hope that his posing as Snyder will work. None of us ever saw him coming.

"Get dressed." Breaker holds out a bag for me to take. "Harlow's going to be here to pick you up soon."

My eyes drop to the bright yellow bag in one hand, then fix on the fast-food bag in the other. "Clyde knows about this place?" The question is out before I remember he said this earlier before he saw what Rune had done to my body.

"Harlow knows us, yes," Breaker says, relinquishing the fast-food bag into my eager hands.

"Nice way to keep it vague," I mumble, only half paying attention to him as I unwrap my food. The parchment paper crinkles sending glee shivering to my belly. When my teeth sink into the greasy food, and the familiar flavor of salty, processed meat explodes on my tongue, I let out a satisfied moan, looking up toward the heavens in a silent thank you.

"I've missed you," I confess to my burger before taking another bite. The men had been providing us with fresh meals or snacks like dried fruits and nuts. It was all so healthy I wanted to cry. "I've missed you so much."

With a smirk, Breaker hands me a bottle of water. "Reaper would have a nervous breakdown if he saw you eating that."

"Don't tell me he's a food snob," I say, reaching for the yellow bag.

"He's definitely a food snob," Breaker says, dropping his backpack to the floor and settling onto the sofa.

“He made pancakes,” I point out. “Food snobs don’t make pancakes.”

A small smile tugs at Breaker’s lips, indicating that pancakes are not a regular occurrence for them.

My stomach flutters, and I shift my focus to the bag, trying to hold back tears. I never thought I’d miss that asshole, but I do.

Inside the bag, I find a pair of black leggings, some plain underwear, and a sports bra, along with a set of basic sneakers and a package of socks. The shirt he has chosen for me is a large Miami Dolphins jersey, which earns him a quirked brow.

“Slim pickings.” Breaker grins, but it fades when I put down my food and slip off his huge shirt, revealing my naked body.

His eyes immediately travel to the bite mark, then the stitches, down to between my legs, then finally back up to my face. “Little Red,” he whispers, voice filled with agony.

I can’t tell which part is causing his voice to crack—the bite that nearly sent him into a rage when he first saw it, the stitches that oddly contort his features, or my nakedness that makes him reach for me and pull me onto his lap. My bare pussy brushes against the coarse material of his black riding gear, right where he is now hard and straining.

“Harlow is going to be here soon,” he groans, kneading my ass cheeks and pulling them apart before pushing them together like he’s thinking about all the filthy things he said this morning. When I lean in to brush a kiss to his lips, he lets out a low, needy sound and whispers my name like a wish.

My fingers trail along his jawline and over his cheeks. He’s so pretty. *Beautiful*.

His mouth covers mine, silencing all thoughts. My hands wrap around his neck and then move down to his chest. They travel to his pants, feeling the hardness of his cock trapped behind the zipper. I break the kiss. Breaker’s pale eyes shift to my arm once more, and I feel him lift his hips slightly, driving up into me. It’s barely noticeable, but it sends shivers down my spine. I grind down onto him, feeling how wet I am.

“It should still be safe,” I whisper, watching as his eyes dart again to my arm.

Guilt washes over me for not telling him this morning that the birth control implant was removed so he could make an informed decision about

having sex with me. He's obviously worried.

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you. Do you have protection?"

A guttural noise escapes that I can't decipher.

"Pulling out is only—" My words are cut off as his lips press to mine.

"I'm not pulling out." He clasps my hands. His lips leave mine and he shifts me onto my back, then positions himself over me, pushing my hand away to unzip his pants and free himself. "Open. Open those legs for me, Little Red."

My thighs part as his palm lands on my knee, shoving them open. He kneels between them, one of his knees on the cushion of the couch, his other leg propped on the floor. He grips my hips with one large hand and brutally pulls me to him as he guides himself toward my entrance.

"Breaker," I gasp, my hand flying up to flatten against the armrest as he inches into me but stops when I whimper. The sting of my pussy stretching around him is overwhelming. *He's* overwhelming. Feral in his need.

"Fuck," he hisses, pulling out before slowly easing back in, forcing my body to accept him.

My eyes close, my pussy stretching to the point the sting is too much. I bite my lip, wincing, trying to take him without crying out as he slips slightly deeper.

"Look at me." He grips my cheeks. "Fucking look at me, dirty girl."

My eyes open and settle on his face. Jaw clenched, brows knit, eyes bright blue and wild, he looks unhinged. Untamed.

"I'm about to fuck you rough. Hard." That savagery in his voice has slick heat pooling between my thighs, helping in ease his cock into me deeper. "That's it. Fu-ck."

He drives forward, pushing, inching. I whimper, spreading my legs wider.

"Come on, Little Red, you can take it. I need to be inside you. I'm about to lose my mind."

I nod, knowing. My heart feels frantic, not just beating wildly, but desperate to relieve the ache that's settled. With my hand still on the armrest, I use my other hand to circle my clit, his eyes following every movement as he continues to slide himself inside inch by inch. Then he's

fully inside me and begins moving, driving in slow but steadily increasing in speed and force with each thrust.

Breaker grips my ankle and lifts it onto his shoulder, bracing my heel. His other grips my hip to pinning me in place. The angle makes him slip in even deeper, and I cry out at the slight pain of him moving too deeply into me, but arch my back, wanting more. Needing more.

"*Fuck*, Little Red, you take my cock so well for such a tiny girl," he grates through gritted teeth. "Suck my cock deep in your pussy, you greedy thing. Yes, just like that. Take all of it."

He thrusts harder, almost brutally. This morning was soft and sweet, but now it's rough, with harsh grips and nails digging into my flesh. His teeth sink into my calf, his tongue trailing over my ankle, his animalistic groans echoing around us.

"I can't hold on much longer, beautiful," he rasps. "I need you to come."

His hand on my hip moves to join mine on my clit. He dips his head and spits, using his thumb to spread the wetness over my sensitive nub. My blood zings with heat and I push back against him, forcing him to fuck me harder. Faster and deeper.

"*Fu-ck*," he grates, head thrown back as he thrusts forward with more force, movements turning sloppy, his thumb circling faster with more pressure. "Your pussy is so fucking tight."

The sight of him losing control pushes me over the edge. I break, screaming as pleasure courses through me, my back arching and my nails digging into his skin. My hips rock against him as I ride out the orgasm.

A wave of heat floods me and his deep, guttural groan grates through the room. By the time I gather my senses, he's already pulling me up and onto his lap, still buried deep inside me. He grips my hips, guiding me up and down on his still hard cock in slow, deliberate strokes, thoroughly fucking his cum deeper and deeper into me.

"We need to stop," he says, although it sounds like he's trying to convince himself. "We don't have much time before he arrives, and you have to go."

"Go?" My heart aches at the thought of leaving him. I know logically that I have to return, and he has to resume his role. Rune sent him an invitation just like they wanted.

“Yes, go, Little Red.” He kisses me softly, achingly tender. “But remember, even if you can’t see me, I’m always with you, keeping you safe.”

***

Thirty minutes later, Clyde storms into the factory, his eyes ablaze with deadly intensity, fingers twitching at his side like he’s ready to strangle someone. When he pins me with those dark eyes, I know we’re going to have a talk later about what he walked in on last night.

I narrow my eyes at him. Yeah. We’re going to talk. He’s been feeding the men information for years.

“Did you forget how phones work?” Clyde snaps, glaring at Breaker behind me, hands on my shoulders, warm chest to my back. “You’re having drinks with Zane in a few hours.”

“Drinks?” I ask, scooting back, so I’m molded to his body. Breaker’s hand drops to my hip and Clyde definitely notices. From the way his gaze fixates on Breaker’s hand and how his jaw clenches, I think he’s putting together the pieces in his head. Things more than likely already knew, but didn’t, maybe was too scared, to name.

“Yes, with Zane,” Clyde says through clenched teeth. He rips his eyes from Breaker’s hand, gripping my hip intimately, familiar with the shape of my body, and locks them with mine. The air crackles with unease. Breaker is the enemy, but he’s also an accomplice. They have a common goal, and that goal is ending Rune.

Breaker’s in it for revenge.

Clyde… I’m not so sure.

I tilt my head back to look at Breaker. “Is Ben your real name?” I ask, remembering he told me last night.

“It’s on one of my driver’s licenses.” He shrugs. “But no, my name is Breaker.”

“One of them?”

Another shrug.

“The man doesn’t exist, Cora,” Clyde says, gesturing at Breaker. “He has no name other than the one his father gave him. He only has this name, Ben Snyder, as a cover for the corporation.”

“Our father kept records on each of us,” Breaker says. “But there are no records of my foster family, or my birth mother’s family. I’ve looked. Fallon made sure when he took us we disappeared.”

“That’s why he took orphans or kids off the streets,” Clyde says. “No one cares if a ratty kid disappears.”

“How do you know all this?” I ask Clyde, still reeling, trying to sort through it all. I think last night my brain short-circuited, and today, I’m just not able to process it all. The school, Clyde knowing Breaker, Clyde working with them, which means he knows the other men too.

“Zane mentioned his yacht,” Breaker says, his deep voice cutting through my spiraling thoughts. “The message I received was unclear. Is that where I’m meeting him?”

My stomach lurches. Zane is known for several things, none of them never changed.

“You know Ben has a reputation for his love of women and parties and expensive boats,” Clyde says. “Zane wants to show off his new yacht.”

“You do?” I ask, barely hearing the rest of what Clyde’s saying other than the single word “women”, which I will touch on later when jealousy isn’t staining every thought.

Breaker’s brow quirks. “*Ben* has a reputation for being a flirt. When we started Snyder, Inc. we all decided I was the best face for the company. Now I have to act accordingly to make it believable, so Rune doesn’t get suspicious.”

“So, *Ben* likes parties and pretty women. *Not* Breaker,“ I say to clarify, well aware of the ice edging my voice.

“Jesus girl,” Clyde says. “Green doesn’t suit you.”

“My eyes are green,” I snap.

“So, I see.” Clyde smirks at my pointed stare. He holds out his hand to me. “Come on. We need to get back to my house before Rune comes looking for you. I left our phones behind because I’m pretty sure he’s tracking mine, but I know he’s tracking yours. Soon he’ll get suspicious if there’s no activity on your phone. Not that he has a fucking thing to say after last night.”

A primal sound edging on a snarl rumbles through Breaker’s chest.

I pat his hand. “Rune’s tracking my phone?”

“Every single incoming and outgoing message, calls, and your location,” Clyde confirms. “So be careful. Don’t message him,” he gestures

to Breaker, “and never mention this,” he twirls a finger in the air, “on your phone.”

I reach for the sneakers, my stomach still in knots at the idea that Breaker is a playboy, when a thought hits me. I turn around to face Clyde. “Did you know they were going to take us that day?”

His jaw tics. “Yes.”

“But they killed Manuel,” I say. “Did you know they were going to kill people?”

“It was a risk we are all willing to take. Reaper didn’t want anyone hurt, which is why I made sure it was on a day few people were in the building.” Clyde’s gaze shifts to Breaker as he rips open the package of socks and hands me a pair. “Besides, I didn’t like the way Manuel looked at you,” Clyde says, straight faced. “He had it coming.”

Jesus H. Christ.

“Although,” Clyde glares at Breaker. “I didn’t realize they were planning to meet you at the club the night before.”

Breaker’s lips curl into a devious smile as he pushes me to the couch and kneels before me. He leans in to kiss my knee as he takes my foot and slides on a sock. When his winter eyes meet mine, his playful wink makes me wish I didn’t have to leave.

***

The sharp, pungent odor of bleach assaults my senses as soon as we step into Clyde’s sleek and modern home. The interior matches the sterile and austere exterior perfectly. Although I’ve been here a handful of times to drop off paperwork, I’ve never stayed longer than necessary or ventured beyond his study at the front of the house.

Clyde turns my way, jaw clenching like he’s trying not to say something he’ll regret. He warned me we were going to have a chat. I just didn’t think it would be right this second. My heart races at the memory of my near assault last night, and I bite my lip, knowing that I’ll have to explain what happened to Clyde. I’m not sure how he even knew where to find me, but I’m grateful he did.

After a moment of intense inner debating, he says nothing and spins on his heel.

As I follow Clyde through the entry and into his office, I take in the home of the man who helped Rune raise me without even knowing it. Most of my interactions with Clyde as an adult revolve around business meetings with Rune and Zane, or discussions at Rune's house about deals and mergers. He's not just a loyal and trusted right-hand man, but also Rune's friend who was present for every moment of my childhood.

Clyde was at every dinner my parents held with Rune. He sat around the pool watching Delly and me swim as he talked business with our parents. As we both grew older, he became like a bodyguard, accompanying us on outings and stepping in for Rune when he couldn't or wouldn't attend events. He was there when I came home from prom, having waited up for me with Rune until I was delivered safely home.

Clyde has always been there, silently watching over me, not realizing he was shaping the type of partner I wanted in my life. Strong. Capable. Dependable. Protective. Slightly unhinged in his love.

It's this unhinged love that made me so scared he'd find out about Rune. As much as I hated what Rune did to me, I still loved him like a father. More. I got so mixed up, bound to him by so many traumas that part of me was terrified Clyde would kill Rune if he found out he took me by force. If he found out that force became consensual out of fear.

Because if Clyde killed Rune, he'd be labeled a traitor and killed like my parents were. And I can't have his death on my hands. It would destroy me.

"Here." Clyde holds out the little bag that holds my phone. My stomach sinks, the fear he looked inside and discovered the envelope, making me sick. But if he had seen it, he wouldn't be so calm right now. He'd be dialing Rune.

"Quick," he says, "answer any texts, so it shows you've been active. Rune thinks you spent last night with me. Give him proof before he suspects both of us."

I unlock my phone and spend a few minutes responding to work-related messages. With a quick glance at Clyde, I pull up my contacts, find the name I want, and type out my message.

My thumb hovers over the send button, my heart stuttering.

I hit send.

With in seconds, it shows Zane's read the text.

I shove my phone back in my purse and strap it to my wrist.

“This way,“ Clyde says, when he sees I’ve done as requested. He leads me out of his office toward the back of his house.

House is an understatement. It’s a sprawling modern piece of art. Everything, inside and out, is a gleaming white—the walls, the furnishings, the stucco architecture—and any accents are a dark, smokey gray-blue. It sits in the older part of town, so it’s surrounded by a large section of property overlooking the ocean, adding to the luxurious feel.

We make our way to a massive gray metal door tucked between two white square columns. I watch him press his palm to a screen and the door slides open.

Cold air hits my face. “What are we doing?”

“You’re going to shoot a gun,” Clyde says.

“Weird thing to say at 10am, but okay.”

“No weirder than me picking you up from your former kidnapper’s criminal headquarters,” he grumbles before striding through the doorway, gripping my hand to drag me along.

The interior is dim until lights gradually flicker on as he advances deeper into the space. I pause, letting out a choked breath.

“Are you serious?” I ask, turning in circles. The heavy metal door clanks shut behind me and the sound reverberates throughout the space. The massive room is painted a military gray, empty except for a section of one wall lined with flat black metal lockers. The opposite wall holds two large black and white images of an old dilapidated stage. In the center of the stage, several ballet dancers are frozen in various poses. The back is hidden in shadow, but I can make out what looks like a long table in the center.

I huff out a laugh, turning back to look at Clyde as he stalks toward the row of lockers. “Very supervillain of you, Clyde. I never pegged you as having a secret lair in your house.”

“There’s a lot you don’t know about me, girl,” Clyde grumbles as he unlocks a metal locker and starts pulling out guns.

“Like you having an armory for one.” I step forward to look at the sleek black firearms. They look like the ones you see soldiers using in war-torn countries, and I quirk a brow in question when he glances my way. “And the fact you’re a rat for the enemy.”

Clyde picks up a large rifle and snaps the clip in place. He hooks bright orange earmuffs around my neck, then gathers some items for himself.

Dark eyes meet mine. “Shall we discuss how you’ve been fucking one?”

I grin. “One?”

The sound he makes reminds me of Reaper. Lethal.

“Delly too.” I smile, showing my teeth. “All four of them, if you’re interested in knowing.”

“I’m not,” he says, turning his back to me. “Come on. I need to shoot something.”

I follow behind him, my skin pricking with nerves, as lights pop on at the back of the room, lighting up the space. Stopping at the center of the room behind the long table, Clyde sets down the two guns and several clips. A control panel rests in the center of the table. Clyde presses a few buttons and lights pop on in rapid-fire succession along an empty corridor. At the end, a spotlight casts a bright blue-white glow onto two targets.

Removing my wristlet and setting it on the table, I say, “You have an entire shooting range in your house?”

Ignoring me, he hooks yellow earmuffs around his neck and picks up a weapon. “Do what I do,” he says, then hands me a rifle that looks too big for me to hold, much less fire. “It’s a semi-automatic, AR-15. Don’t point it at anything you don’t want to shoot.”

“Shouldn’t I start with something smaller?” I ask, eyeing it before taking it. It’s heavier than it looks, and my stomach jumps at the thought I’m holding a loaded weapon. “Like a Glock or something?”

“Glocks have a kick too and it would be uncomfortable for your little hands.” Clyde moves to my other side and demonstrates how to hold the rifle. “Keep it tucked tightly against your shoulder. Your body will absorb the recoil, so you need to maintain a firm grip.”

With my heart skipping, I mimic his stance and how he’s holding the weapon, careful to keep my finger off the trigger like him.

“Good,” Clyde says, slipping the earmuffs on. He waits for me to follow suit. “I’m going to fire so you can see how loud it is and how it kicks back.”

I bite my lip and wait.

The bullet explodes from the barrel and the target ripples. He shoots again and my heart hammers. I focus on how tightly he’s gripping the gun, and how much it kicks back against his thick shoulder, how his body absorbs the impact.

When he lowers the rifle, he looks at me.

“Can I marry you?” I ask, half-shouting. “That was sexy.”

“Don’t be crass, girl,” he says, but there’s a smile tugging at the corners of his lips. “I’m too old.”

“So, you’d consider it?” I ask, “I’d much rather marry you than Zane.”

The way he rolls his eyes makes me laugh.

“Come on,” he says, gesturing to the shooting range. “Let’s see what you’re made of.”

“Piss and vinegar, remember?” I raise the rifle and aim.

“Do you want a black eye?” He repositions the weapon in my hands, showing me how to look down the sight, then steps back only when he seems satisfied.

With a deep breath, I pull the trigger and feel the solid kick of the gun against my shoulder. It’s not as bad as I anticipated, but still more than I expected. My brows knit when I notice the target didn’t move.

“Try again,” Clyde shouts. “Hold on tight.”

I aim again and take several more shots. Then I keep shooting until the clip is empty and still the target doesn’t move. “I’m not hitting it,” I say, setting down the gun and removing the earmuffs. “Not even grazing it.”

“Girl,” Clyde says with a hearty belly laugh as he removes his earmuffs. “You have balls of steel.”

I gesture to the target. “Steel balls aren’t helping my aim.”

Clyde picks his rifle back up and screws a long black tube to the end, then another, longer one. He catches my eye and grins. He’s so in his element right now that I can’t help but match his smile.

“Is that a silencer?” I ask him, my eyes growing wide as he points and shoots, the noise nothing compared to before.

“Suppressor.” He lowers the rifle and hands it to me. “Here, try this one.”

I take it and aim.

“This one’s got a bigger kick, so grip it like it’s trying to escape. You control it, not the other way around.”

Taking another deep breath and widening my stance, I pull back on the trigger and the pop doesn’t prepare me for the recoil. I stumble backward slightly, more surprised than anything. I blink through it, and

right myself, maintaining my death grip and aim and shoot. The target ripples.

I lower the rifle and grin, a satisfied fuzzy warmth spreading in my chest when I catch Clyde's satisfied smirk.

"You're fucking natural," he says. "Again."

I aim again and shoot, feeling steadier and more confident, hitting the target almost every time until the clip is empty.

"I like this gun more than the other," I say, slipping the earmuffs off. "My aim is better."

"Helps when your bullets are live."

I catch his eyes and notice the amused expression on his face. "What do you mean?"

He chuckles. "You really think I was going to hand you a semi-automatic with live bullets?" He grabs the first gun he gave me and reloads it with a fresh clip, then hands it over. "The first magazine was shooting blanks." He repositions my earmuffs and points to the target. "Aim to kill."

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Chapter 35

Cora

I STARTED SLEEPING WITH the lights on when I was six years old. It gave me a small amount of comfort to see the devil as she entered my room. My mother would come in and tell me to stay in bed and go to sleep. She never tucked me in. No, Fallen Angels with flaming red hair don't offer such comforts.

One night, I dared to ask for a glass of water, and she slapped me so hard that I never asked again. From then on, I had everything I needed before she came to enforce her strict rule of staying in bed. It wasn't until I snuck out one night and stumbled upon her bent over the couch, a man thrusting into her from behind while sucking on her underwear, my father watching from behind his desk, that I finally understood why my mother wanted me to stay locked away in my room at night.

Not that she cared if I saw what she was up to. To be honest, with the number of guests coming in and out, she probably didn't give a damn. She just wanted to be left alone. Having a child ruined her parties and shoving me in the closet was her quick fix.

I got used to it after a while. Being in that darkness for hours. But then she forgot about me that day and I became a different person.

When she finally found me two days later, I could see the horror in her eyes. Not because she almost killed me. No, my mother's only concern was *her* well-being. She argued with daddy I didn't need to go to a hospital.

They'd try to have her arrested, and after all, it was *my* fault she had to put me in there.

Being back at the estate has all those memories clawing their way to the surface. I've wandered around, turning on every single light in the house, Clyde in tow, until I finally told him to leave me alone.

Zane said he'd be here soon, and my nerves are frayed.

My earlier message to him said I wanted to meet to go over a few things. He agreed and said he'd meet me here this afternoon.

After last night, I know I need to do this. Between Rune and Zane, if this marriage is finalized, I will no longer have control over my life or my body. Neither man will be satisfied until they own my soul.

I have to put a stop to it.

When we finished at his home range this morning, I told Clyde we needed to return to the estate. He grumbled, but he drove me here anyway without further questions.

Now I'm standing outside the hall closet where she had locked me away, dressed in my mother's slacks and silk blouse, her black flats, the pretty diamond earrings she cherished adorning my ears. I want to open the door and let light flood the space that holds so much darkness. Like bringing brightness to that haunted place will somehow ease the pain stabbing my heart.

I'm a fool, I know.

But I still want to do it. For the past me. For the kid who still lives in my memories, terrified of the dark. I long to bring some light to her world, but I can't even lift my hand to open the door.

The realization that I cannot fight for my past self hurts just as much as the fact that it took years for me to start fighting for myself now. And I only found the courage because others told me I am worthy.

I never even believed it myself. I always felt like I deserved the abuse. My mother had ruined me in so many ways. I was shaped by her abuse and neglect and what she never gave me. Love. Appreciation. I spent the first ten years of my life feeling like a burden, constantly told that I was worthless. Even after escaping her torment, I still carried the reminder that my worth came with conditions.

I had to be sweet. Amiable. Never complain. Stay out of the way. Then, and only then, was I worthy of attention.

Nerves fizzing, I reach for the door handle. My fingertips brush against the cold metal knob, while my other hand reaches for the light switch on the wall. Turn. Flip. Pale yellow light fills the small space, causing my stomach to twist and my fingers to ache.

My gaze falls to the inside of the wooden door. The grooves left by my little fingernails still etched in the wood grain.

It's just a closet. Not a tomb. I am no longer that helpless girl. I am a woman now, determined to put an end to being everyone's doormat.

Hanging on the metal bar are old sweaters and raincoats. In the corner my little rain boots sit, the yellow flowers faded. On the top shelf are old storage boxes and albums. I stand on my tiptoes, reaching for the first album. My finger's brush the edge and pictures scatter, fluttering like leaves to the floor as pull it down and hug it to my chest.

"What are you doing?" Clyde asks from behind me. I startle, dropping the photo album.

"Nothing." I drop to a crouch to stuff the scattered pictures in the book and stand upright, kicking the door shut.

The loud *clang* of the doorbell makes Clyde stiffen, and he grabs my arm, glaring at me. "What the heck are you doing? Who is at the door?"

I give him a sly smirk. "Zane and I have some important matters to discuss."

***

Maybe this was a bad idea. My hands tremble, and my heart is pounding so fast it's making me dizzy. This meeting felt like a good idea the other day, but right now I'm not so sure. Right now, I feel like the small woman I've always been—an afterthought, a pushover, someone to be used and cast aside.

A pit-stop on the way to better things.

A symbol of revenge for a man whose cruelty knows no bounds.

"I've got the bastard waiting in the foyer." Clyde's deep voice breaks through the mess in my head. "Want to tell me what you plan to discuss?"

"No," I say, avoiding eye contact as I slide my palm over the glossy desk. My eyes land on the white envelope holding either my freedom or my demise. "Send him in."

A day ago, I had called for a cleaning crew and now the house sparkles under the late afternoon light streaming through the open drapes. The faint scent of lemon polish lingers in the air.

I miss Viper. Miss his hands on me and the way he seems to eat up the space in a room, like it belongs to him, and he just allows others to exist in it.

Striker

Reaper.

God, how I yearn for Delly.

A few minutes later, Zane saunters in, Clyde trailing closely behind. Zane gestures to the large desk, lip lifted into a snide smirk. “Embracing your roots, I see.”

I give Clyde a dismissive nod and I feel so much like my mother in this moment that my stomach roils.

Clyde turns to Zane, pointing a finger in his face in warning. “Keep your fucking hands to yourself or I’ll cut them off.”

Zane’s chuckle earns him a deadly glare as Clyde exits the room, closing the door behind him.

He’s going to give me such shit later.

“Please, have a seat.” I gesture to the plush chair across from my father’s absurdly large Victorian desk. As I stand up from my seat, I smooth down my mother’s slacks and move to stand before him. Propping a hip on the desk to stare down my nose at him, which is hard to achieve when you’re only five-foot-two. “And tell me about my roots.”

His eyes narrow as he sits, unbuttoning his navy blue suit jacket as he does. Zane is a contradiction in every sense of the word. He’s handsome and charming. His smile makes people believe he’s open, his pretty eyes almost kind. But he hides his darkness behind a statin veil because he’s pure evil, all the way down to his tarry, putrid soul.

Because what kind of man laughs when a mother locks her little girl in a closet?

“Why am I here?” Zane asks, clearly annoyed. He won’t be soon. Soon he’ll be cowering. “I came here with the understanding you were ready to—“

“Suck your tiny dick?” I cut him off, leaning back and crossing my ankles. “Let you fuck me? Tell me Zane—“ I lean forward, gripping the

arms of his chair, my face level with his, ”—do you still cry when you come?”

I stumble backward as he shoves me away. Zane bolts from the seat, his eyes swirling with rage.

He grips the collar of my shirt and drags me forward, but then forcefully pushes me away as a laugh slips from my throat.

“Better be careful, pretty boy,” I snarl, my insides buzzing with a combination of hatred and quiet satisfaction at the look of fear on his face.

“Or what?” he growls.

“Or all your secrets may accidentally slip past my lips.”

Zane’s brows furrow, like he’s trying to figure out which secrets I’m referring to, at the same moment his hand drops away from my shirt.

Heart hammering, I lean back against the desk and smooth the collar of my shirt. *This may actually work.* With a smirk, I say, “Let’s finalize the details, shall we?”

His jaw clenches, but he nods as he lowers himself back into the seat.

“When did you find out?”

His tongue presses to his canine as he eyes me. “Only a few weeks ago.”

“This agreement is new?”

“Enough.”

“Before or after we were taken?”

“A few weeks before.”

“Who proposed it?”

“Rune.”

Of course he did.

And of course, Zane would accept. The greedy bastard he is. He’s just like Rune. Hiding his evil with smiles and sweet praises. Stupid of me to underestimate him. I should have known better.

“Being an antagonistic bitch doesn’t suit you, Cora,” Zane snaps. “Out with it.”

I smile sweetly as his face grows red with irritation. “Being an impatient narcissist suits you well, but you don’t see me getting all hot in the face about it.”

“My, my, what sass you have,” he says, laughing loudly, but it’s edged with violence. His eyes darken as his jaw clenches. “I can’t wait to fuck it right out of your mouth.”

I grin, propping my hands on the desk behind me, willing them not to shake from the violence swirling in his eyes. “See, here’s the thing, Zane. You won’t be anywhere near my mouth, or any part of me with your pencil dick.”

Zane quirks a brow. “Pencil dick?”

Just like a man. More concerned that I insulted his penis than the fact I just threatened him with revealing his secrets.

I shake my head. “More like the stub of one, after it’s been shaved down to the nub.”

He laughs, enjoying our game. “And how will you stop my pencil dick from taking what I want? Clyde’s not going to move in with you when we’re married.”

“I don’t need Clyde.”

“Oh, no?”

I lean forward, whispering so he has to lean forward too. “See, I know a little something about you.”

He chuckles darkly. “Is that so?”

“Indeed,” I say, matching his arrogance. “But I’m willing to a make a deal with you.”

A single brow raises as a smile snakes over his lips. “I’m glad to see you again, Cora. I was worried that your time with those degenerates had removed your spark.” Zane keeps his eyes locked on mine. Stupid man thinks he has the upper hand because he’s bigger, stronger, and has Rune’s ear. Thinks I’m incapable of fighting back. “What’s this deal?”

I reach for the envelope. My heart thumps in my ears as I lean down and set it on his lap.

Without a word, he grabs the envelope and leans back in his seat. As he pulls out the images, his face drains of color and those hazel eyes shoot up to meet mine, and I know I’ve got him.

The photos are grainy, but you can still identify who’s in the pictures.

“Where the fuck did you get these?” he hisses, shoving them back into the envelope and tucking it into his suit jacket. He glances toward the door, like Clyde’s there, taking stock of our conversation.

“You can keep those as a memento,” I say, gesturing to his chest. “Don’t worry. I have copies and two separate drives as backup, in case you lose those.”

Zane's chest rises, hands tightening on his thighs. I'm sure he's imaging throttling me, but I've got his balls in a vise, and he knows it. "What do you want?" he says.

"Unless you want those images leaked," I say, looking as smug as I feel. "You will never touch me again."

His teeth grind, his jaw working so hard I'd bet he's about to crack a tooth.

"Do you understand what I'm saying, Zane?"

"You can't prove anything." He taps the envelope hidden in his pocket. "I made a deal with Rune, and these pictures won't even faze him."

"Ah yes. The deal with Rune." I stand upright, reveling in the power I'm holding. *God, this feels good*. Finally having the upper hand. "Let me see if I have this correct. We get married. You take control of my assets after I sign it all over to you. Then Rune gets my shares of the corporation, and you get my money. Probably the real estate too?"

"About sums up what he proposed."

Walking back behind the desk, I sit, meeting his eyes dead on. "I'm surprised you'd want this house."

His jaw tics.

"Then again, you have some fond memories from all the time you spent here."

I don't miss the slow drawing in of air. How his fingers grip the armrest. How his legs shift slightly, like his body is preparing to either lunge for me or bolt from the room.

Maybe he has yet to decide.

"I'm not sure what you mean," he says, even though the tightness in his jaw, the pulse throbbing in his neck, screams he obviously knows exactly what I mean.

"Prissy."

Zane blanches and my belly fizzes with excitement. He shrinks into himself, like a dog waiting for the next kick.

"Prissy really liked you." I lean back in the chair, sucking in the power I have over him, filling my lungs with it. Loving it's sweet acidic taste on my tongue. "From what I remember, she screamed your name the loudest."

His quick exhale lets me know I have him. I was young, but fuck, so was he. Zane would have only been in his early twenties when my mother

held her parties. He was thinner back then, boyish but muscled. Face unmarked with age or experience, more pretty than handsome, the way young men tend to be.

I smile prettily, repeating the words he used to say when he'd come over. "'*Come, here, Prissy, sit on my lap.*'"

I always saw them as they arrived. Sometimes my mother would forget about me and when she'd realize she'd forgotten to lock me away, I would catch glimpses of their faces as she shut the closet door.

Zane was one of her favorites.

And while the images of the security footage showing Zane walking into this house fifteen years ago, means he spent time with my parents, it doesn't provide enough ammo to force him to his knees.

Only I can do that.

Stupid of him to think I wouldn't remember him. But I do. His chameleon like ways and his vile sneer. How he'd talk loudly, not caring that a little girl was in the house, hearing and storing away everything he ever said.

Everything they ever planned.

"What do you want?" he asks quietly.

"You will not touch me. You will not threaten me. You will not come within five fucking feet of me. You will refuse to marry me, claiming you don't want to marry a Julian," I say. "Call it off and never come near me again."

"He won't believe that."

"No?" I ask. "Papa would hate to hear that his trusted second, the man he let into his company, the man he trusted as if he were his own family, hid that he conspired with the enemy."

His chest rises and falls, breaths coming faster and faster as panic sets in. "I didn't know."

I bolt up, hands slapping down on the desk as I lean over it, rage searing my veins. "Bullshit, Zane."

He pales.

"You knew exactly what you were doing when you plotted with my mother to destroy Rune's family."

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Chapter 36

Breaker

15 years ago, September, Age 13

“Was it bad?

He nods.

“Scary?”

“Worse.”

“How did you guys survive?”

“A cave. Not really a cave, just an alcove in some rocks. We headed west. There’s a large rock formation tucked away in the foothills a few miles before you reach the lodge. It has a water trickling through the rocks in the back, near the floor. It’s safe to drink.”

“That’s where you slept?”

Hunter nods again.

“When it’s your turn, when you go, don’t let fear take over. Remember it’s a test of your skills. To see who is strong enough to survive.

“But—

“You already know he’ll do anything for you. The second you land, kill him. Make it quick and clean. Do it before he even knows it’s coming.”

“I can’t kill Vi—”

“Don’t drag it out, Breaker. Viper will do anything for you. Including this.”

***

We stop next to a creek and stare down at the shimmering water. It looks clear, but looks can be deceiving. I lick my parched lips, my tongue running over the dry flesh. We’ve not had water in over twenty-four hours and it’s wearing us down.

My body feels sluggish, tired, weak, my muscles sore. Dehydration would be a terrible way to go. Maybe that’s why Fallon always gives us water when he puts us in solitary.

“Do you think it’s safe to drink?” Striker asks Viper. His eyes look a little sunken and he’s rubbing his Adam’s apple like he’s imagining what that water would feel like moving down his throat.

“We have no way of knowing until we try it,” Viper says from next to me, his gaze following the thin trickle of water to the west. It’s the first water source we’ve come across. “If we get sick from it, we’ll just die faster from dehydration.”

“From shitting our brains out, you mean,” Striker says. “If we could get a fire going, we could purify it.”

“With that?” I ask. “We have nothing to put it in.”

Viper makes a sound in his throat. “Let’s keep moving. We’re bound to find something. That truck can’t be far.”

I fall instep behind him, splashing through the creek. My boots squelch in the soft mud as I follow him to the other side, Striker right behind me.

We took turns sleeping throughout the night, huddled together for warmth. As the sun rose, we set off to the west, in the direction we saw the plane. By some miracle, we came across old tire tracks and have been following them for hours. Viper calculated that based on the time it took for us to reach the clearing and the time we saw and heard the plane, we couldn’t be far from its takeoff point. He estimated that the rough terrain

would have limited the old truck to a speed of no more than twenty-five miles per hour, and it seems he was right. We found tire tracks.

We keep along the tracks and continue west, away from the clearing we slept in, deeper into the woods.

And we walk, leaving the creek behind.

And walk.

Hunter told me that night how they survived the wilderness. How they found a little cutout in a large rock formation. And I hope we find it because I'm not sure how much farther we can go without water.

"Can we stop for a minute?" I ask, leaning over to rest my hands on my knees.

"No," Viper says, walking ahead. The trees have thinned, and the tire ruts are deeper, more like a regularly traveled dirt road. "We keep going."

"I'm tired too, Vipe," Striker says, leaning a palm against a tree. "Let's rest."

"If we stop, we die," Viper says, still walking ahead. "And that's not happening."

"Viper," Striker calls.

Viper turns, arms spread out, face contorted with dread. "I said no," he snaps, glaring at Striker, then me. "We keep going until we reach the truck."

"We don't even know if it's out here," I point out.

"And where would it be?" Viper asks. "They took off in a plane and had to leave the truck. If we find the truck, we can drive it—"

"Where?" Striker asks. "And what happens if we run out of gas?"

"Or if they didn't leave the keys," I say, which earns me a glare from Viper.

"We'll hot-wire it," he says, marching toward me. "Now get your ass moving, Break. Or I'll fucking—"

"What is that?" Striker asks, pointing behind me.

My arms tingle and I turn, moving away from Viper, who's still stalking toward me, but he hesitates as his eyes follow Striker's pointed finger.

That's when I see it.

My stomach lurches. A shivery sensation snakes up my spine, wrapping around my chest, and clawing at my neck. It spreads out, moving

over my shoulders, then down my arms, causing a tingling sensation in my hands.

“Viper,” I whisper, barely able to form the word.

“Fuck,” he says, grabbing my arm and dragging me back against him. “Don’t fucking look.” I feel Striker’s body crash into mine. “Neither one of you look.”

He turns me to face him. My vision blurs and my face growing hot. My heart thunders, beating so hard that it’s pounding through me and stirring up my gut. I think I may be sick.

“Vipe.” I hardly recognize Striker’s voice. It’s so choked with fear. “Tell me that’s not what I think it is.”

My cheek is suddenly smashed to Viper’s warm chest, and my eyes land on Striker’s face, contorted in a way I’ve never seen before. Brows knit, eyes wide, chin almost trembling.

Fuck.

We’re going to die out here.

It’s my punishment. God’s way of paying me back for so desperately wanting a name.

Desire is a sin. That’s what the nuns used to tell me. It’s deadly And I wanted, *desired*, my name so bad I did the worst thing a person could do. The only sin worse than lust is wrath. And I let it take over my body, my mind. Let wrath feed the bad things inside me and now my brothers and I are going to die as payment for what I’ve done.

“It’s okay,” Viper’s saying, and I think he’s been saying it over and over, because he’s cupping my cheeks now, looking down at me with so much fear in those blue eyes that my knees give.

“Who was he?” I hear Striker ask, but his words sound far away.

Viper’s forehead presses to mine. “Breath, Breaker. Breathe,” he says. “Keep your shit together and breathe.”

I open my mouth to tell him I’m sorry. That this is all my fault. That I’m sorry he never had a Nanny like I did. I’m sorry I wasn’t strong enough to defy Fallon that day on the rooftop. How greedy I’ve been, wanting Father’s love again, when Viper’s never even had it at all. Not like I do. And now he never will because of the things I’ve done, but a strangled sob creaks out of my throat instead.

He presses his lips to my forehead, cupping the back of my neck., trying to keep me focused.

“We have to keep going,” Viper says, pulling me forward. He grabs Striker’s shirt and yanks him, drawing him close with an arm over his shoulder as he moves us along. “Striker, don’t look back. Let’s just keep going.”

“Who did that?” Striker asks, daring a glance over his shoulder.

He’s braver than me. I don’t want to see it again. I already see too much when I close my eyes at night.

All that blood.

“They fucking gutted—”

“Enough,” Viper barks out, catching my misstep. “We need to get to that truck.”

“Is someone going to do that to us?” I hear myself asking. “Is that how we’re going to die?”

“No,” Viper says, but I hear how his voice quakes. He’s scared too.

Striker stops walking, pointing behind us. “Someone did that. On purpose. They are out here right now.”

“Stop.”

“Someone pinned that man to a tree and peeled his fle—”

Stop!”

“Who the fuck did that Viper?” Striker yells. “Who did that to that man?”

“I don’t know,” Viper says, but I can barely hear him. “All I know is we need to get the fuck out of here, and fast.”

Viper cups my cheeks again and I realize I’m crying, sucking in air, my lungs burning, my legs shaking, my mind flashing on what’s behind us.

It’s all I can see.

Face nothing but red ooze. Arms sawed off. Flesh gone. Rope digging into the still wet tissue, keeping him tied to the tree.

Guts spilling out, covered in black flies.

I turn and heave, but nothing comes up.

“Come on,” Viper says, pulling me up and dragging me along. “Get moving, Breaker, or I swear to God, I’ll leave your ass and—”

“I’ll have to hike back alone,” I say for him.

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Chapter 37

Breaker

THE SCHOOL IRONED OUT any unease normal men have when they are under stress. We were trained brutally in a harsh environment, the constant threat of Fallon's punishments looming over us. Living under constant strain and the threat of Fallon's wrath became our normal. We lived and breathed; we grew and slept; we ate and fought in a place that wanted to hurt us.

We became immune to the violence and the nagging fear. Although sometimes it would creep in late at night, and sleep was impossible. There'd be times I was so overcome with fear I'd leave my room and slip into Viper's. He'd let me take the top bunk, and I'd finally be able to fall asleep. The few nights I found his room empty, I'd try to sleep on his top bunk, alone in his room, but the fear lingered. When I couldn't shake the nagging panic building within me, I'd find myself knocking at Striker's door, seeking any form of comfort I could find. He'd give me an exasperated sigh, but point to the top bunk, and fall back into bed and be asleep within minutes.

Sometimes the fear and anxiety would appear in odd ways. Like a jittery, itchy feeling in my hands or legs and I'd have to tap things to get rid of it. Sometimes even the tapping didn't work, so I'd try to say the Lord's prayer that had been drilled into our heads, muscle memory kicking in as I did the sign of the cross as if to ward off those bad feelings.

Or maybe trap that monstrous fear inside my chest with all the other bad things I'd done.

But over the years, I noticed all that darkness and fear warped. I wasn't as nervous as I was before. Instead, any tension I felt turned inky and thick inside me. Like the unease I felt twisted around my lungs, and the only way I could rid myself of that slick unease was to pour that uncomfortable feeling into something else.

Break it free of me by cracking something else open and placing it there.

Just like when I was a boy, and I knew I needed to break things to make that feeling go away.

Like right now.

Right now, I wish I could trap, burn, fucking rid myself of this coiling feeling snaking through my gut that's threatening to destroy four years of work, because I'm about to smash this asshole's face into his skull.

It would help. Punching him over and over until I heard something break. Cracking his face open would ease this agonizing tightness in my chest.

"I fucking love this thing," Zane says, but I'm barely paying attention. All I can see is Cora sobbing in Harlow's arms as they waited for me in the parking lot.

This mother-fucker *touched* our girl. *Hurt* her in some way that Clyde had to intervene.

This ugly asshole plans to *fuck* her.

Tap, tap, tap.

The ring on my pinky clicks against my glass. I only wear the ring with the lion's head when I'm Ben, never Breaker. The irony doesn't escape me. But I would never dress like this. White linen button-down shirt, slightly open at the collar, revealing a few of my tattoos and the thin gold chain at my neck. Khaki pants and leather shoes. And Ben's classic aviators. I look like an asshole, as big of one as Zane, and I'm having to act like one too because that's what we had to do in order to make our plan work.

Viper says I don't have to act the part, just be myself. He thinks he's funny. I wish he was here. He's so much better at this than I am.

"—Probably because of the clientele." Zane winks. I debate taking the martini glass in his hand, breaking it on his face, and stabbing it into his throat so I can watch him bleed out. What kind of asshole drinks apple

martinis? Another smirk and he raises his glass. “Some of them don’t even look legal when they board.”

I silently say the Lord’s prayer.

Zane waves to the stewardess, and circles his finger in the air, indicating he wants another round. I glance down at the drink I’ve not touched in my hands. I’m drinking a vodka rocks because I’m not a douchebag. Or rather I’m pretending to drink it.

I need to keep my wits about me. Zane Devin is testing my every nerve and my ability to hold my composure. If I slip even the slightest from my role as Ben, I risk not just my life, but Harlow’s and Cora’s.

After a minute, the stewardess brings us more drinks and that need to break something returns as he winks at her like the jerk he is.

She grimaces and backs away. I watch her retreat, wishing I could just kill Zane right now. I’d be doing the world a favor.

”—Can you believe that?“ Zane asks. A light breeze carries his sharp cologne—musky and sour—my way, making me shift my focus back to him. He takes a long pull of his fresh martini. The man’s going to end up drunk before we can even go over the contract.

“Impressive,” I say, even though I have no idea what he just said. I lean slightly into Ben’s ambiguous accent. Could have a slight French touch, could be American. I could be from anywhere in the world helping lend to the idea that Ben is from everywhere and is everyone’s friend.

I’m a fucking nice guy. Everyone likes me.

“She’s a Codecasa. She’s named *Fair Play*,“ he says. “Forty-five meters long, this girl can go up to thirty-two knots.” He looks around with a lopsided smile. We’re sitting on the mid deck, the sun setting behind the city, washing everything it touches in gold.

If I wasn’t with this asshole, I’d be enjoying myself. It’s not just Ben who loves boats, and speed, and beautiful things.

“It’s a shame,” Zane says. I shift in my seat to look at him. This fucking demon wearing a man’s skin. A chill runs up my back, memories trying to take over, but I push the horrific images away. “I was going to buy my ex-fiancé a yacht of her own as a wedding gift.”

Ex-fiancé? Now he has my full attention.

“Ex?” I ask, doing my best to keep my facial expression even. “I wasn’t aware you were engaged.”

He waves his glass, like he's swiping the words from the air. "It was short-lived. Fucking bitch." His brows knit like he's had a sudden thought, and I wonder how long it would take for him to bleed out after I stabbed him in the balls. Minutes, maybe even a handful of seconds, if I cut deep enough. "I think you probably met with her. Cora Julian. She's Rune's accountant. Or one of them, anyway."

With my head cocked to the side, I stare off like I'm trying to place the name. Meanwhile, I'm thinking about how Harlow will not enjoy our chat later. How he failed to tell me this important detail, one I *needed* to know, makes my already throbbing headache grow. Because my girl not having to marry this sack of shit is definitely something I needed to know.

Unless he doesn't even know yet.

"Can't place her," I say, removing my aviators and tucking them into the pocket of my shirt. "Should I be congratulating you on your freedom or expressing my condolences for your breakup?"

He lets out a bark of laughter. "Definitely a congrats is in order. The girl was a complete whore. And the worst part, she can't give head to save her life."

Tap, tap, tap.

I want to tell him I know firsthand my woman sucks dick like she's trying to take my soul into her body. Thank fuck Viper's not here. Zane's face would be ground into this glossy white table by now.

"Nice ass though," he continues, oblivious to the ways I'm imagining breaking his hands. "That pussy though." He grimaces. "Honestly, I was scared to go bare with her. She's spread her legs so wide for anyone to sink in that she's got a goddamned cavernous gaping hole between her legs."

Tap, tap, tap.

"Why did you propose?" I ask. "That pussy must have been good at some point."

The urge to wash my mouth out, to rid myself of those foul words, makes me slam my drink back. Then the other. The vodka burns my tongue, sears my throat, and I relish the feeling. It's better than tasting the acidic flavor those belittling words left behind.

"Rune," Zane says, raising a hand to the stewardess and motioning to me. "He wanted me to marry the girl. She's fucking loaded, but she's not worth it. Every time I sank into her, I was risking my life. I had her tested, but shit, she was like fucking a bag of marshmallows."

He had her tested. This fucking rabid killer had my girl *tested*.

Tap, tap, tap.

I imagine smashing my glass into his mouth until his teeth knock down his throat. He's not once touched our Little Red and the fact he's lying and insulting her all in the same breath sends electric fury through my veins. It sends noise, roaring in my ears. My insides coil up, my chest drawing together tighter and tighter until it feels like I need to dig my nails into my skin and pull myself a part. Pull *him* apart.

"I understand," I say, eyeing the stewardess as she sets my fresh drink down. I let my fingers trail over her hand, like Ben would, giving her a flirty wink. My hand stings, and I wrap it around the glass, hoping to dull the feeling of another woman. Worse, the sticky sensation of touching someone without their permission. "Making connections in this business is important." I flash Zane what Viper calls my panty-melting smile, and it feels like my fucking soul is shriveling up. How I'm going to pull this off, I have no clue. "But not at the risk of your dick falling off."

Zane barks out an annoying laugh. *So fucking funny*. He won't think it's funny as I'm plucking his fingernails out one by one.

"You can take her downstairs," Zane says, lifting his chin to the stewardess I just felt up. "Let off a little steam before heading out."

I need to let off steam, but not that way. Only violence will ebb this tangled up darkness in my chest.

"Besides, she knows she'll get a bonus if she doesn't put up much of a fight."

Tap, tap, tap.

I wink, my stomach roiling. "We love a little fight, don't we?"

Tap. Tap.

Tap, tap, tap.

"But I need to head out soon."

"Ah, yes," Zane says, gesturing to the steward standing behind the long bar. "We need to go over the contract before I have my office forward it to your associates."

The contract. *Finally*. The entire reason I'm here.

As the steward retrieves a thick envelope from the cabin, I take note that Rune and Zane haven't replaced their security staff, which I find concerning. Makes me wonder if he's that paranoid, which could be even more dangerous for us, or if he's waiting, thinking we'll make a move on

him. Neither scenario is ideal, because if he's waiting for us to make a move, leaving himself exposed, he could have a plan up his sleeve. But Clyde's heard nothing.

It's possible the lack of security could be Rune's way of showing Fallon he's open for discussion. Leaving himself vulnerable to an attack could be a message to Father that he'll do anything to get Delilah back.

The steward brings a large, thick envelope, and hands it to Zane. Zane removes the contract, setting it before me. I lift the first page, acting like I'm reading it. No need. I already know what it says. Clyde gave us a copy to study years ago.

I lift a brow when I come across the initiation portion of the contract. "Initiation?" I ask. "Is our business not enough?"

"It's just a protocol Rune put in place." Zane sips his drink, then sets it down, leaning back in his seat, elbows out, fingers laced behind his head. That friendly, loose demeanor vanishes and Zane is here. Present. The man who not only works for, but with Rune, to maintain control over his business, and those around him.

The man who's capable of atrocities I'll never rid from my mind.

Because they're the same things I'm capable of. *Capable* being the key difference between us and Zane. Between myself and the man before me. I may be capable of doing horrendous things, but I draw a line. Zane leaps over every moral and ethical line drawn in this business.

He thrives on evil.

"It's just a little test, nothing real challenging," Zane says. "When Don joined, he and his wife had to go into a shark cage to prove they had the balls to take part in the Wilderness Experience."

"As long as he doesn't throw me in a pit of snakes, I'll be fine," I say with a grin. "Just send the contract to my office and I'll have my associates go over it as well."

He leans forward and gives me a slick smile that makes my stomach churn. "I'd be careful what you reveal around Rune," he says. "That snake tidbit may give him some ideas."

Rune and his ideas. I know all about those.

"What did you have to do for the initiation?" I ask, though I have a feeling I know.

That smile turns dark, lips lifting at the corners into a vile grin. "Let's just say I proved my loyalty to Rune a long time ago."

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Chapter 38

Breaker

I ONLY HAVE A few hours, so I have to move quickly. My heart ricochets in my chest, blood pounding in my ears as I leave the docks and drive Ben's sports car to the hotel. My footsteps acho as I stride through the lobby, making sure to walk in front of the camera's, as I head up to my room, winking at the group of young women gathered at the desk, smiling at the concierge, and chatting with the bellhop in the elevator on the way up to my suite.

Once inside my room, I grab my bag and change into my gear, gathering up my supplies and tucking them into my pockets. Then I grab my helmet, slipping my mask and it over my head.

When I booked the room for Ben, I chose this one because of the security**.** My room has a camera aimed down the hall toward the elevator, but I knocked it a few degrees to the left, aiming it away, so I could slip in and out without being seen. The only thing the footage will show is the wall. It doesn't matter because the others recorded Ben walking up to him room, the guests and staff can attest to seeing me if questioned.

I slip back out of the room, and take the staff elevator to the first floor, then walk through the parking garage, out to the street, and head down to the garage a few blocks away where have my bike.

My heart hammers, but it's no longer nerves. It's the familiar, skin heating feverish anticipation that washes over me right before a mission.

And this time, I’m not following orders. This time I’m running on instinct, which heightens the intense, almost heady sensation, buzzing though me.

No one ever tells you how difficult it is to change patterns. It’s not just habits or words we speak to ourselves late at night or the things we see inside ourselves when we look in the mirror that require breaking. It’s a breaking of who we are and who we were and everything we thought we’d be.

In order to change our lives, we have to cut out everything that feels safe. We have to be scared, terrified even. Because it’s that discomfort, that pain that makes us realize we need to change.

My father is one of the worst men I’ve ever met and yet, he was familiar. His cruelty felt safe because I knew what to expect. I knew how to talk to him, how to make him act nice. How to get him to speak kindly to me. And when that kindness came my way I saw nothing but evidence that deep down he loved me like a son.

I willingly became his soldier, molded by him to react exactly as he needed me to. I was shitty when he wanted me to be. I was kind when he knew I would be. Harsh and cruel like him when he bent me to it.

I was after all his favorite son. Just like him. Capable of great things. Capable of terrible deeds.

Capable.

That’s what I feel right now. I don’t feel like Breaker, the man who can’t take orders, or when he does, it’s only because he’s scared of the consequences. I feel like justice. Revenge. I feel like a protector of innocent things.

Like the man my mother needed when she was being hurt the day I was conceived. Like maybe, this was my purpose all along. Not to destroy things for money, or to gain even more power and influence for my father, but to break and take and ruin any and every bad thing that tries to snuff out the good in this world.

Which is what I’m about to do.

***

Bright beams of sodium colored light slant over the parking lot. I pull the bike up to the wall surrounding the lot, keeping to the shadows and wait.

He’s due to meet Rune at his club in exactly three hours. Zane will be leaving to head back to his house—

There he is. Right on time.

I watch as Zane descends the ramp, staggering as the light waves from the inlet shift the dock up and down under his feet. He stumbles a little, catching himself on a light pole on his way to his car. He drops his keys at one point, nearly falling over as he bends to pick them up.

Fuck. The idiot is drunk.

Is it wrong of me to let him drive? The question sits in my thoughts as the sharp beep of his car unlocking breaks the quiet and he tugs the driver door open.

I debate leaving my bike and just driving the fool home, but that would be a bad idea. I’d have to get back here to retrieve it, which would present more problems and more questions.

The car alarm cuts through the quiet parking lot, then abruptly stops. Still wobbly, he climbs into his little sports car and slams the door with such force the sound echoes through the lot.

Now that he’s securely inside his car, Zane fiddles with his phone long enough that I start to question if he forgot what he was doing. Right before I lose patience, the engine turns over. He puts the car in reverse and shoots from the parking lot, tires squealing in his wake.

Releasing the throttle, I take off a minute later, I following at a safe distance. Not that I have to worry too much. Zane’s driving intoxicated and has no security team to keep an eye on him. All his focus is on the road right now, at least I hope. Dread builds in my gut that I shouldn’t have let him drive, so I inch closer to the shiny red car. But I’m not worried.

It’s never going to cross his mind he’s being followed.

We weave through traffic, stopping at red lights, and head further west, away from the city. Zane bought a massive estate in a new subdivision a few years ago. While I can appreciate the beauty and luxury, that’s not the reason I’m taking note of the distance between the homes, the high concrete and stucco walls separating one property from another, the low lighting, or how each home is surrounded by lush plants and large trees, all for privacy.

It works well for what I have planned.

When he turns onto his street, I fall back some, turning my lights off. The low rumbling of the engine seems too loud as I creep along the street behind him, but he’s not even slowing down. He pauses long enough to let

the metal gates in front of his house open, then drives though slowly. When the gates are almost closed, I lean forward, rolling the throttle and drive through just as the gate slaps closed.

His car comes to an abrupt stop. The door opens.

Idiot. Who the fuck gets out of their car when a stranger drives up?

"Get the fuck off my property," he shouts.

Even though it's dark, the only light from the round globes atop the gate posts, I can see the fear spread across his face when he sees who I am. Part of me wonders if he realizes exactly *who* I am now. I'm not just the biker who humiliated him outside the office.

I'm one of *them*.

"My security team is going to fucking—" His words cut off as I release the kickstand and climb off my bike.

His phone clatters to the ground. Zane scrambles to get back in his shitty little sports car, but I grab him by the back of the neck just as he tries to dip inside. Panic makes his body go stiff.

Fight, flight, or freeze.

Then he's all movement, legs flailing, arms twisting, hands fisting to punch. One lands on my helmet with a loud thud. He attempts to kick back, trying to connect with my knee, but I know it's coming so I dodge it and swipe his feet from under him with my boot. He goes down hard. I help him, still gripping his neck to make sure he lands flat on his stomach, face to the rough concrete.

"You motherfucker!" he screams, palms flat to the ground, trying to push up. His angry growl gets cut short as I grip the back of his head by his hair and smash his face down to the driveway. The crack of his nose hitting sends a jolt of electricity through my veins, almost orgasmic with its intensity.

So, I do it again.

His gravelly screams come to an abrupt stop. Dark blood splatters the concrete and my boots, the low lights making it gleam like glittery paint. Satisfaction at seeing the dark spray across the ground curls in my gut.

Standing upright, I release him, but he's too stunned to move, curling into himself as he cups his face.

"You broke my fucking nose." A gurgled groan comes out in a gasp. He spits out blood. "You broke my *nose*."

A broken nose is about to be the least of his problems.

I grab the phone he dropped, shoving it into the pocket of my jacket. Fisting his hair in one gloved hand, I pull him to his feet, my blood starting to run smoothly, like heated oil in an engine as I half drag him toward his house.

Bet he's regretting not replacing his security team.

Trying to function, much less see with a broken nose, is tough when you're dealing with it for the first time. On top of it he's drunk which makes him slow to react. Not that I care. But it's why he's not fighting me much, his loafers scraping on the concrete drive trying to keep his footing with my long strides as I drag him to his front door.

His loafers catch on the first step. Irritation scrapes across my skin. I tug him harder, jerking his head back to set him right. Zane releases a weak groan, his hands flying up to scratch at my thick gloves. I tighten my grip and shake him until he stops, then shove him up the steps.

This is where I'm taking a huge risk. His security camera is recording us right now, and there's a possibility that Rune can see this footage live. He may be receiving notifications as I press the code into the keypad on Zane's front door. If he's tracking Cora, he's tracking Zane.

The door unlocks with a loud click. I turn the knob and kick it open. Zane squeals as I push him through the doorway still holding his hair. Lights pop on, flooding the entryway with bright white light as I step in after him.

"*Welcome home,*" Alexa says as I stop us in the foyer to scan the space.

"Alexa, call the—" Zane's words cut off as my fist meets his throat.

His knees buckle, hands now at his neck as he coughs, blood splattering on the floor in front of us. Zane stumbles but I keep him upright and turn him to me. I shake my head slowly, waggling my finger in his face.

No. No. No. Zane. We won't be doing that.

"*I'm sorry, I didn't catch that,*" Alexa says. "*Do you want me to play your favorites?*"

Zane coughs again.

"*Okay,*" Alexa says, and the melancholy notes of Chopin's *Nocturne op.9 No.2* play throughout the house.

I nod appreciatively.

More lights come on in the rooms off either side of the entryway, showcasing dark woods and deep forest greens. In fact, everything is a deep

green, from the walls to the sections of velvet furniture I can see, to shelves, and if it's not green it's a dark polished wood.

I want to tell him he as a really good decorator, but then my voice would give away that I'm also Ben and then I'd have to kill him.

Which I'm still debating. We'll see how the next hour goes.

With my boot, I kick the door closed and the sound echoes through the near empty foyer. It seems to wake him up a little.

"What the fuck do you want?" Zane asks, recovering enough to realize the danger he's in. He swings for my helmet, but it's sloppy, poorly aimed, and I knock his fist away, annoyed.

Releasing his hair, I grip his shirt by the collar and drag him with me to the keypad to type in his code disarming the security system. Rune's enough of problem. I don't need the county deputies coming to check on him.

"I have money," Zane says, stumbling as I release his him and he faces me.

No shit.

His eyes dart around, swimming in his head as he looks for an escape. First to the door behind me, and I can practically see the wheels turning sluggishly in his head as he realizes he'll have to go through me. He eyes dart to the office to our right. He debates, and dismisses that idea, then he looks to the large sitting room to the left. Another debate makes his face go slack. Appears Zane doesn't like that idea either.

His brows pinch.

He turns and runs.

Finally.

My heart kicks. I take off, stalking behind him, my boots *thunking* along with the beat of Chopin's nocturne. Before he's even through the kitchen door, I kick. My boot lands behind his knee and he crumbles, going down so hard. He skids, head smacking with satisfying crack on the hard tile floor.

The impact stuns him, so he's down for a minute, but he shakes it off, and scrambles to his feet. Not even looking over his shoulder, he breaks into a run.

I'm a little disappointed. I honestly thought he's put up more of a fight. But cruel men tend to be weak when faced with enduring the fear they've elicited from others.

When he’s almost at the sliding doors at the back of the large kitchen. I pick up pace, taking note of the woods and greens in here too.

I really like his house. I need to tell Viper we should decorate our house on the coast like this. Cora would look so pretty in a room with deep greens, all cuddled up with Delilah on a velvet couch.

The picture in my head is enough to spike my blood. Fire and heat and rage scalding through me that he fucking took her from us. Planned to breed her, when the only men allowed to ever touch her, are us.

Me.

He must see my reflection stalking toward him in the glass because he slams into it, blood coated fingers slipping franticly over the lock trying to get it open. Zane lets out a scream as my hand latches on to him, and I snatch him away from the door. With his blood smattered shirt, I turn him to face me, using all my force to slam his back into the glass. It rattles, glass shaking. Zane screams, fear making his voice rise a few octaves.

I slam a hand over his mouth to shut him up, mostly because his constant screams grate my nerves and wince when I take look at his nose. Blue is already coloring under his eyes, his nose swelling, blood congealing, just a thin trickle smearing under my glove. The bridge is smashed and slightly crooked

Fuck. That’s got hurt.

Good. He deserves worse.

“What the fuck do you want?” His muffled screech turns my stomach. *Fucking coward.* “I have money. Lots of money. Just fucking let me go and you can have whatever you want.”

The fact he still has no idea who I am sends red waves of anger shooting down my arms, to my hands, making me shove him back harder into the glass door.

Is he really this fucking stupid?

Does he really think we’re just going to let him have Cora? The arrogance makes me release his mouth and grip his throat, then I drive him again into the glass. It rattles so hard, I debate doing it again and again until he crashes through it.

“Fuck.” The curse is cut off as his head hits the glass, knocking his vision off balance. His eyes swim for a second then land on my visor. “I have money in my wallet.”

Asshole. Always about money with him.

“I have pills too,” he says. His pulse is beating so hard, I feel it thumping through the gloves, pulsing into me. I tighten my grip, ready to consume his terror, letting it fuel my rage.

This fucker put his hands on our girl. He hurt her in some way that she refuses to fucking talk about. He scared her, hit her, then *shamed* her into silence. I grind my teeth, wanting to press my hand brutally into his windpipe, crushing it until he chokes on his blood and terror.

“There’s pills up upstairs,” he chokes out. Blood drips into his mouth. He licks his lip. “And other stuff. Name it and I have it. It’s yours. You can take it all. The pills are the good ones. Prescribed stuff.”

I shake my head. That seems to hike his terror up a few degrees. Little does he know he’s going to need those pain pills.

Gripping his hair again, I drag him toward the kitchen table. I have a good three to four inches on him and at least fifty to sixty pounds of muscle. Fighting me has already proved futile. Using my boot, I kick out a chair and slam him down into it. He goes so easily that I almost laugh.

Does he really think if he cooperates, I’m going to go easy on him? Has he really no sense of the things he’s done? Maybe he’s a true psychopath. Maybe he really doesn’t comprehend why I’m here, right now, pulling wire from my pocket.

“Why do you have that?”

Jesus.

He tries to get up, tries to kick, which makes my heart skip a little. But I punch his temple, which hurts like a mother fucker, but worth it with the way his eyes roll around dazed. My next hit lands to his gut and has him doubling over, so he’s not fighting me.

I grab one of his wrists and wrap the wire around it, then place his palm on the table, smashing it down with my fist to keep it from wiggling free as I secure the other end of the wire around the table leg, repeating the same wrapping and securing with the other wrist, until both his palms are on the table surface.

“What the fuck do you what?” Zane tugs the restraints and releases a sharp hiss as the wire digs into his flesh.

Doesn’t take him long to realize that if he tries to wriggle free, if he tugs too hard, the wire will end up slitting his wrists. He’ll bleed out and it’ll be his doing.

Taking his hand, I pull his phone from my pocket and use his thumb to unlock the screen. It takes me only a second to find the security app that controls the cameras. I disable the ones in the kitchen, the hallway and outside. The videos are uploaded to the cloud so I can't delete the footage of us arriving, but I can at least make sure what happens next isn't seen or heard.

The song playing through the speaker changes to Beethoven's *Appassionata*.

This man is a raging asshole with a murderous streak, but he has really good taste.

I place my hands on my hips nodding, then twirl my finger in the air, silently telling him I like his choice of music. When Zane tries to break free again, I tick my finger back and forth, and back away to the center island, rooting through the drawers collecting tools. On my way back to the table, I snag the paring knife from the block. Reaper loves these little knives. They're always sharp.

While I collect items, Zane tracks my every movement, wincing each time I pull out a new utensil to inspect it. Maybe he's not so dumb after all. He's finally figured out he's fucked.

Maybe he even knows why.

"Did she send you?" he asks. My arm freezes mid air, but I keep moving trying not to show my surprise. "I did as she asked."

That makes me hesitate, but I cover it up by inspecting the mallet I pull from a drawer, holding it up to the little hanging fixture over the island so he can see the light glinting off it.

Satisfied with my selections, I head his way.

"Fuck man," he says, growing panicked when he sees the utensils I'm carrying. "I called it off like she wanted, okay? Tell her I did. I fucking called it off and told Rune I didn't want to marry that whore."

I scuff. I can't help it. If Cora did send me, he's really not helping his case with the name calling.

He takes a shaky breath when I place the garlic crusher down, followed by the paring knife, and mallet. I don't have much time, so we need to get started.

"He asked me why I was suddenly changing my mind, okay? And I told him that I didn't want to marry a Julian, just like she told me to say."

Cora. We're going to have a talk. She must have done this today. Our sweet little fighter. She's blackmailing this asshole. I think this warm tingling feeling isn't just pride, but I think I actually love her. Really truly love her. She's so perfect. Of course she'd not wait to be rescued. Our Little Red would take matters into her own hands. She's been fighting for her life for as far back as she can remember and here I thought I was going to swoop in and keep her safe.

Fool.

Even back home, being held hostage, not knowing her fate, she fought us, sassed us, stood her ground every step of the way.

She hit Reaper for fucks sake.

I shake my head at the memory and pick up the paring knife.

"He said he understood." Zane's voice gets a slight squeak to it. "He said it was fine, that he'll find another use for her."

That makes me pause and I don't give a fuck that I have just given myself away. In fact, I *want* him to know this is coming from us. He *needs* to understand that when you fuck with us, when you try to harm one of us, when you kill one of us, when you think you can take what's ours, we're aren't going to run.

No. We're going to destroy you bit by bit. Piece by piece. Remove you from this earth one tiny part at a time until you're wishing we'd just kill you.

Just like he did with the other's. Those poor souls in the images Harlow smuggled out. The same images that live in my head, bleeding into my dreams as nightmares.

Just like they did with Hunter.

"What are you doing with that?" he asks as I flip the little knife in my hand.

His eyes move around in panic, growing wide the longer I stand flipping the knife and catching it by the blade. Funny how everyday kitchen utensils take on an ominous look when you're strapped to a table.

I flatten his palm to the surface. He whimpers and goes to move. I don't have to apply too much pressure to keep him still. He remembers quickly the wire will rip into his flesh if he tries to free himself.

"What are you do—" His scream fills the kitchen as I slip the tip of the blade under his fingernail. He forgets about the wire and jerks, then screams as it cuts. Heat fizzles through me, shooting straight to my chest. It

eases the pressure there slightly. I slip the knife out, amazed at how little blood flows from the wound. “Please, man.”

Begging already. I bet all those people begged. But I know Hunter didn’t. He was far braver than this sack of shit.

Zane whimpers again, looking up at my helmet with pleading eyes. I wonder if he sees what a coward he is in his reflection. “I don’t know what you want.”

He eyes the knife. I set it down. His shoulders relax. That makes my skin itch so I pick it up and stab it down, driving it with all my force until it cuts all the way through his hand, digging into the wood table. He screams, this high shriek of a sound that grates out of him. His other hand lurches upward and the wire slices into the back of his wrist.

Better be careful.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck!”

I watch him stare at his hand, the knife through the center, blood pooling, then running in a river down to the table. He slowly calms, easing into and accepting the pain. His lashes flutter and he tilts sideways. I swear to god if this is what makes him pass out, we’re never going to make it to the good part.

I pick up the mallet.

“Oh, my god,” he shrieks. “Please no.”

It makes a loud click as metal hits metal and the knife digs further into the table. Zane lets out more of a groan than a scream, eyes pinching closed.

“I don’t understand,” he says. “I don’t understand what you want.”

Revenge.

It’s quite simple. Universal.

When I pick up the garlic press, his hazel eyes flash with fear, going wide. His face does this melting thing, which looks a lot like dread. He winces as he tries to remove his hand again. Blood gathers on his wrists. It’s up to him how this will go.

He’s being given a choice, which is rather lenient of me considering he gave our girl none. He tried to do god only knows what to her. If Harlow hadn’t stopped him like she said, I can imagine the things he’d have done to her. Him and Rune and since I can’t touch Rune, Zane’s going to have to do.

But Rune will get the message. He'll know, even if this idiot can't figure it out.

I suck in air, wishing I didn't have to wear the helmet to hide my identity. If I wasn't wearing it, I could smell the pungent fear that's pooling in the pits of his dress shirt. Take it into my lungs and let it ease this painful rope knotted around my chest. But I can't, so the only thing that will feed the dark thing inside me, will be his screams.

"Please," he whimpers as I slide the garlic press over his pointer finger, positioning the knuckle over the little bowl.

My insides shiver, but not with excitement. This is going to hurt like a *motherfucker*.

"Fuck, man. Please don't"

Despite the slick feeling sliding through me, despite the undeniable satisfaction snaking through my lungs, I don't like this.

I never have.

I picture Hunter's face.

Remorse means I have a conscience. A conscience means I'm capable of empathy. And empathy means I'm not as horrible as I've been told. Maybe I was created.

Created by our father to destroy. To wreck.

To break.

But right here, right now, I'll gladly be all those terrible, hideous things for her. I'll exact her revenge, brutally. I'll be everything my father told me I was. Monstrous, ruinous. The breaker of things, of rules, of men.

All for her.

When I slam the device closed the sickening crack fills the room and that feeling in my chest eases.

Just four more to go.

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Chapter 39

Breaker

16 Years Ago, May, Age 12

MY BIRTHDAY WAS YESTERDAY. Not that anyone knows that. Some of my brothers don't have birthdays. Reaper and Hunter do. Striker and Viper do. But Seeker and Raid don't remember theirs. Makes me wonder how they know how old they are. Maybe Fallon just told them, and they believe him.

It doesn't matter much anyway—if we remember our birthdays. We don't celebrate them. There are no cakes like in Cooks movies, or even pancakes like Nanny made me. When I woke up and realized what day it was, my chest ached with missing her. I've not seen her in seven years, and I wonder if she's still living in the same little house in the village. If Fallon visits her like he used to.

I wonder too sometimes if he just liked her or if he ever loved her. I may be the youngest, but I figured out why Fallon came to visit with Nanny

those days they sent me away for lessons at church. When it first hit me, I was jealous. Nanny was mine. My good thing. But I guess she was Fallon's, too. He was usually sweet to her. Thinking back, I think she liked him a lot more than he liked her.

I know how that feels. To like someone so much and they don't seem to like you back. There's a girl in the village who likes me. I think she does, and I like her, but she's a little older than me. She has me kiss her cheek, so she must like me, but she's not the one I wish would notice me.

It's a silly thought, because I know he does like me. But some days, I wish he'd look at me longer.

"Get out of your head and concentrate," Viper says from next to me. "We're supposed to be practicing."

I look down at my hands. My fingers stroke over the ivory. I press the white key, then the black and the high notes ring in the air, floating around the bare room with hard vinyl floors and chipped walls.

"Come on, brother," Viper says. He props his chin on the violin—the fiddle, he calls it—and draws the bow across the strings. A low, drawn out note tugs at my chest. I like it when he plays. He's not very good, but I still like watching him play. He gets this soft look on his face like he's feeling the music.

Father insists we practice for an hour every day. Striker tried every instrument in this room and was good at all of them, but he only really likes the old guitar in the corner. He's out at practice today with Maxim, practicing with a new rifle Fallon brought back from the States when he went last week.

I refocus on the keys before me and play. Viper sets his violin down and sits next to me. That clean, bright smell that seems to surround him fills my nose. Our hips mash together, and he doesn't seem to notice, so I pretend not to.

I pretend a lot of things.

The door behind us opens, and Fallon walks in, and the air in the room changes. Becomes thick. He's not wearing one of his suits and little alarm bells clang in my head. Fallon rarely wears a uniform like ours, but today, the gray pants and shirt match mine. There's a long wooden box under his arm, but I know better than to ask him what is inside. He'll tell me if he wants me to know.

“*Syn*,” he says, and I know he means me, not Viper. I still have yet to earn my name. “Come with me.”

A frown tugs at my lips. “I’m not done with my lessons,” I say, feeling Viper’s body tense next to me.

I’m the only one who dares sass Fallon, but the second his face turns cold, his features seeming to go flat, I regret the words.

“Come with me,” he says and walks back out the door.

With a glance at Viper, I scoot around the bench and follow Fallon out the door and into the hall, my breathing unsteady. I sort through the last few days, trying to make sure I did nothing wrong, but come up blank. I must not be in trouble.

The stiffness in my legs eases at the realization, and I keep up with his long strides, our boots clicking on the old vinyl tiles as we make our way to the back of the building. When we reach the heavy metal door that leads to the broiler room in the basement, my stomach lurches.

“We’re going down there?” Heart thundering, I do my best to keep the hint of fear from my voice, but I taste the tang of it in my mouth. We’re not allowed in the broiler room. Ever.

“You are a smart boy,” Fallon says, his tone not matching the darkness flickering in his eyes. Something odd glimmers in them, reminding me of the oily pools of water that gather in the concrete entrance at the gate after it rains. “So smart, that what I’m about to ask of you, I know you will never repeat. Not to your brothers, not to Cook, not to Teacher. And not to Commander Maxim.”

My stomach does that twisting, knotting thing. My mind races with a list of things he’d not want Maxim to know, but I don’t think there’s a single thing Maxim doesn’t know.

Fallon’s brow rises, waiting for my response. “Do you understand?”

I nod and say, “Yes, sir,” but I’m lying because confusion whirls in my head. And fear. Not just from the intense stare of Fallon’s ice-blue eyes, but *what* he’s asking me. To keep another secret.

Except this one feels like it’s going to be darker than my sweet, sunny Nanny.

He lifts his chin toward the door, indicating I’m to lead the way. My hesitation earns me a stiff shove. Scared of disappointing Fallon by showing fear, my palms smack the metal bar, and I push the door open. It hits the wall with a loud clang.

A drop of water hits my head, making my heart skitter with fear as we descend the damp concrete steps. My boots scrape as I take the last step and stop at the bottom of the stairs. There's barely any light, just a bulb overhead, and I imagine dark things living in the thick shadows draping the corners of the room in darkness.

Then I see it.

Instinctively, I take a step back, bumping into Fallon's solid chest. Confusion mixed with fear slides up my arms, making them tingle.

"Why's he down here?" I whisper.

Without a word, Fallon brushes past me and approaches the bound and gagged man lying on what looks like a gurney from the infirmary. I stupidly wonder if Doc gave Fallon the metal table or if he stole it.

This is his school. He doesn't need to steal.

A loud thud jolts me out of my thoughts as the man on the gurney struggles against his bonds and yells through the gag in his mouth

My eyes dart to Fallon. He sets the box down on a small metal tray table next to the man and stares down at me expectantly. I'm not sure what he wants me to do or say. I've seen enough movies to gather that this must me an evil man. I briefly wonder if he's a good man who got caught by the enemy, like I saw in that one movie, but dismiss it because Fallon wouldn't take a good man and tie him up.

Fallon isn't nice all the time, and he scares me a little, but he's still Father. He loves me but has to be hard on me so I become a good *soldat*. Besides, if he's too nice to me, it will make my brothers not like me, so I'm punished with everyone else. I deserve it too. Fallon says my nasty streak gets the better of me, and I need to control it.

Like when Nanny told me I had to control the monster in my chest, not the other way around.

After a minute, the man stops yelling and thrashing. I step closer to see if I recognize him. He looks like a regular worker in the village, no one I've seen before. His white shirt is stained under the armpits, and his jeans are dirty. His feet are bare and I wonder if Fallon took them off, or if the man lost them.

I wonder too how he got down here.

"Who is he?" I ask again, keeping my voice low.

The sound of my voice seems to do something weird to the man because he twitches a little, like he's surprised. Then he talks again, but the

gag keeps him from forming the words properly.

He sounds like he's saying, *gid*, *hocking gid*, over and over.

He keeps saying it, getting more and more agitated. The sharp slap of Fallon's hand connecting to the man's cheek makes me jolt, and the man stops talking.

"This man is a dangerous man," Fallon tells me. "And we're going to ensure he understands that there are consequences for being wicked."

I'm about to ask Fallon why he didn't just toss him in solitary or take his belt to his back when Fallon opens the box.

My mouth gets sour, bile rising in my throat.

"This man has done something heinous," Fallon tells me, removing a tool from the box. I step back, not wanting to be near it. "Something that only bad, sick men do."

My eyes grow wide. "Did he kill someone?"

"Worse, my syn," Fallon says, eyes dropping to the instrument. "Far worse."

I can't imagine anything worse. I know there are other sins nearly as bad, but murder sits at the top of the list. Stealing is bad too, but I doubt Fallon would have this man down here, tied up and gagged, for just stealing.

"He did something terrible to Emilia."

My blood chills, like someone injected ice into my veins. My voice scrapes up my throat when I say, "What did he do?"

I'm not sure if I want to know. Whatever he did must be bad. Did he kill Nanny? My head spins at the thought. I stumble back some, my chest feeling a little too tight, and I cross my arms, grasping my biceps. My foot taps on the dirty concrete floor. Just once. It echoes loud enough that it drowns out my ragged breathing.

"Do you understand that when I teach my sons a lesson, it is for your own good?" Fallon asks.

The question slices through me, ripping into my thoughts. I peel my eyes from the man and look at Fallon. He's still holding the instrument, but he's looking at me now, eyes fixed on my face with a sinister gleam in them. Dread creeps into my gut.

"This man needs to learn a lesson," Fallon says. "One that will stay with him for the rest of his life."

“What did he do?” I ask, whispering for some reason again. Maybe because this feels wrong. All of it. The man down here. The sludgy feeling in my gut. But what feels even worse is the thought of this man hurting Nanny.

“I know you won’t fully understand what I’m about to say,” Fallon says. he takes a deep breath. “This man hurt Emilia. In ways men can hurt women. He forced things on her. His hands. His body.”

I imagine this man trying to kiss Nanny and my blood burns.

She’s my Nanny. She’s Fallon’s Emilia. Emilia is pretty and soft and bright sunshine and flowery dresses. The thought of his gross, big hands on her face as he tried to kiss her, making her cry, sends hot anger through my chest. Makes it grow tight. Like it does when I get that bad feeling inside me. That dark, thick sensation that feels like sticky vines wrapping around my ribs, poking into my lungs, and it’s hard to breathe.

When I think about her not wanting him near her, my blood boils. When I think about the other possibilities flooding my mind, that sticky tightness in my chest travels up my throat and nearly chokes me.

Hunter talks all the time about the girls in the village and what they do to each other when he visits. I know what men and women do when they like one another. And if this big man did those things Hunter talks about to Nanny, and she didn’t want him to, then he deserves to be tied up and gagged and kept down here.

He deserves worse.

He deserves a lesson, like Fallon said.

One he’ll remember.

My teeth grind, anger making my hands twitch. My fingers curl into fists.

No. This isn’t just anger. This feels like destruction. Like a need to destroy.

“What lesson should he learn today, son?”

“Not to touch what’s ours.” I step toward the man, my eyes locked on his face. I want to remember what he looks like. His pale skin, pores filled with grit and dirt and other muck. It would feel good to smash my fist into his face. His hands are big—attached to thick meaty wrists. I imagine taking a dull knife and sawing through the fat, slicing them off. He’s got a gut, like Cook’s getting, and he’s got short arms and legs. He’s stocky, not built like a soldier at all.

My teeth gnash together, the urge to crack my fist, my boot, anything into his skull so strong I shake. My chest squeezes, my lungs burning with each rapid breath.

"And how should you teach him this lesson, Breaker?"

It takes a second for the full sentence to slip past my anger. At first, I don't think I heard him correctly through the thundering in my head, so I rip my gaze from the man and look at Fallon. Then I hear the rest in my head.

You. Breaker.

That thundering grows louder. I feel it in my chest, beating hard, like that monster Nanny said lived inside me is rattling against my ribs, screaming to finally being noticed. I've just earned my name.

Fallon always tells me I break things. Rules and codes and dishes and his patience.

I like my name. Breaker.

But then I realize what he's said.

How should you teach the man a lesson, Breaker?

I blink, looking back at the man. Fallon, Father, he just gave me my name, based on my skills, yet all those things he says I am are bad things. They aren't a skill like Striker has, or Seeker, or even Viper.

It's all the bad things that live inside me like shadows.

I break things. I ruin things. I destroy things.

Nanny told me as a little boy, I needed to keep that dark monstrous need under control and not the other way around.

And Fallon wants me to unleash it. To teach this man a lesson.

So, I'm going to break him.

I take the hammer from Fallon and inspect it. It has a sharp point on one side and a flat surface on the other. When the man sees the tool he writhes and screaming, *gid, hoking gid,* over and over along with a stream of other things I can't make out.

Not that it matters.

"Go on, son," Fallon says. "Teach him what it means to hurt."

The man's gaze snaps to Fallon. His eyes widen, and he struggles, yelling around the gag. And I finally understand what he's saying.

Fucking kid. You're going to have a fucking kid do it.

Leaning over, I look him in the eye. He stills. I raise the hammer. He screams, but then it's cut off and turns strangled. The sound of bones

cracking releases some of that tight, furious tension inside my chest. Sounds gurgle from him, the hammer in his hand oozing bright, thick red.

I pry it out and do it again.

Then again.

No. I’m not a kid.

I’m a monster.

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Chapter 40

Breaker

16 Years Ago, May, Age 12

COLD. THAT'S ALL I feel. Cold inside. Outside too.

Just like the endless blue. The room I was in. The place father saved me from. The one he put me in so he could come to my rescue.

Maybe he's a bad man.

Maybe I am too. A bad kid.

I did bad things.

Terrible things. Things I don't think Nanny would want to know, even if I did them for her.

"Hey."

I blink away the water in my eyes, lifting my eyes from the grimy tiles.

"You ran out of hot water, brother." Hunter's face moves into my line of sight.

A shiver runs through my shoulders. The water turns off.

“Why are you in the shower with your clothes on?” Hunter asks, crouching in the shower with me. I lift my hands. Inspect them. They look clean, but they don’t feel clean. All of me feels dirty. Bad inside and out. Stained.

“Is that blood?” His voice drops. “What happened, brother?”

“Breaker,” I tell him.

His brows knit. It takes him a second to realize what I’ve said. He gives a subtle nod. “Breaker.”

My eyes drop. I’ve wanted a name for so long. But that was before I knew how heavy the weight of carrying my name felt. This twisted, poisonous feeling doesn’t feel like I thought it would. I don’t feel better. I feel even darker inside. Like my bones are stained with the shadows that watched me hurt that man.

Hunter stands, walking to the door of the bathroom. He leans out and screams, “Viper!”

I shake my head. I don’t want Viper to know. I don’t want him to see me for what I am.

When Hunter pulls me up, I let him, my soaking wet uniform making it hard to move. Making me feel even heavier.

“What happened?” he asks, cupping my cheeks and forcing me to look at him. My eyes drop again. “What did that fucking psychopath make you do?”

“Break things.” I say, my knees weak.

“I understand,” Hunter says, then curses softly under his breath. “You feel bad because you’re not monster like Father.” He shakes me until I look at him. “Do you hear me? Do you feel bad?”

I nod.

“Then that means you have a conscience unlike him. Remember that okay?” Hunter shakes me a little like he can shake the words to make them settle in my head the way he wants. “You’re not bad. You’re a sweet, loving boy. You are so good and deserve better than this life. Don’t let him break you. Don’t believe him if he tells you that you’re only good for destroying things. Even if you do, even if you have to, even if you hurt people, you’re not bad inside, okay?”

I nod even though I don’t agree.

“What the fuck are you guys doing?” Viper says from behind Hunter.

My insides squirm. I take a step away from Hunter and find Viper glaring at him, those pretty eyes I love clouded with anger.

“Meet Breaker,” Hunter says, flashing a smile. I don’t feel like smiling so I don’t.

Viper’s laugh echoes in the room. “Fitting.” He loops an arm over my shoulder, eyeing my wet clothes, then his gaze snags on the obvious blood staining my shirt. His jaw pops but he says nothing.

Water drips from my clothes, trailing a wet path down the corridor to our rooms. We stop in front of my door and Hunter disappears, then reappears with a bundle of clothes. Viper guides me into his room. Hunter comes in behind us, tossing my dry clothes on Viper’s bunk.

The two exchange a look and Hunter leaves, shutting the door quietly behind him.

“Change, then lie down,” Viper says, dropping to his bottom bunk and turning his back to me.

I change, draping my wet clothes on the metal chair in the corner holding Viper’s books, then crawl onto the top bunk.

“Down here,” Viper says. “Come down here.”

I climb down, and lie next to him, him on his side me on my back. I’m halfway off the bed it’s so small and he’s so big, so I turn over, pressing my back to his.

“Do you want to talk about it?” he asks quietly after a while.

“No,” I say a little too harsh. I don’t want him to know what I did to earn my name.

I feel him shift behind me.

“Viper?”

He grunts.

“Did you have to earn your name?”

“Go to sleep….” his voice trails off, then, “Breaker. I like that. It’s almost as good as Viper.”

He says my new name again. And again, using different voices, sometimes high pitched, sometimes low and gravelly, until I’m laughing. Until I finally like the sound of my name.

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Chapter 41

Cora

"YOU STAY RIGHT HERE." Clyde points to the thick white rug in his large living room. "Do you understand me?"

I pull my feet up onto his pure white couch, noting how his eyes widen at the move as if my are feet are going to stain his luxurious leather. "Right here," I say pointing to the floor too. "I'm to remain frozen in this exact spot."

His jaw pops. "You do not leave this house. I have a security system and cameras all over the house. I'll know if you leave."

"Never knew you were into the freaky stuff, Clyde. Are you sure I can't marry you?" I say with an exaggerated wink. When Clyde looks like he may pop the vein in is head I say, deflated, "I won't leave, okay? I'll stay here, and watch TV and raid your fridge."

His shoulders relax, but he's still glares at me as if I'm going to make a run for the door any second. Appears he doesn't trust me. Smart man.

"I'll be back in a few hours." He checks his flashy watch. "This shouldn't take too long. Rune called and demanded I meet with him."

Shit. My stomach lurches. I have a feeling this is about me. I guess Zane told Rune already. But I don't say that. Instead, I nod, my stomach sinking at the thought of what Rune's going to do now that Zane's ruined his plans.

"When I get back, we're going to talk," he says, looking at me pointedly.

I avoid eye contact, curling my feet under me on his couch. The last thing I want to do is talk. Not about what I did earlier with Zane. Not about what happened at the fundraiser, much less with Clyde who's been more a father figure to me than my own. Rune was for years, until he wasn't.

Clyde's been constant at least.

"Say it again," Clyde says.

I sigh. "I'll stay in your bleach white house, eat all your old people snacks, watch your old people movies, and sleep in your guest room on the bed with ancient quilts and knitted blankets, and mothballs under the pillows."

"What are old people snacks?" he asks brows knit.

"Raisins?" I shrug. "Those weird green and white swirly candies and hard candies that look like strawberries and have that gooey center."

"You love those nasty things," Clyde says.

"Then I must love old, nasty things," I tell him. "Because I love you."

From the corner of my eyes, I see him shake his head as he walks away. "I don't have quilts."

I hate lying to Clyde, but there's no way I'm staying here. I'm so sick of men telling me what to do.

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Chapter 42

Breaker

THE RATTLING ON THE bay door startles me enough that I jolt, making the vodka in my glass slosh over onto my hand.

"Fuck," I murmur, setting my drink down on the coffee table. When I came back to the factory I knew sleep wasn't coming anytime soon so I grabbed Viper's vodka and poured a drink. Then another. I'm three in and my head feels a bit fuzzy. I don't drink often but tonight I needed to shut down the images whirling in my mind.

The bay door rattles again. Only one asshole knows where this place is, and he always pounds on the bay door instead of walking around to the side entrance like a normal person.

I take my time walking to the far side of the room, then smack my palm on the button. The door rattles open. Before it's even halfway up, Harlow ducks under the door and stalks toward me, fury twisting his features.

Guess Zane managed to get loose. I have to admit I'm impressed. I underestimated his determination and his tolerance for pain.

"What the fuck did you do?" Harlow yells, his deep voice echoing around the room.

Yeah. He's loose.

"Wire?" Harlow stops maybe a foot away looking up at me with hands on hips, eyes wild and angry. Everything about him looks frayed. His suit which is usually impeccable, is creased and his blue tie is askew. Even

his dark brown eyes look worn down, tattered at the edges. “You tied the asshole to the table with wire? Then broke all his fucking fingers?”

“Just on his left hand,” I say. “He’s right-handed so he can still jerk off.”

That tattered look in his eyes turns to steel and now he looks sewn back together with a mean glint hardening his features. “And as if that wasn’t bad enough, you fucking drove a knife through his hand into his kitchen table and left him there to figure out how to remove it himself?”

“I cut the wires, and I left him his phone,” I say. “And the mallet to loosen the knife. He just had to knock it a few times to—“

The sound from his throat is both disbelief and bewilderment. “Zane’s in surgery right now and Rune’s on a fucking warpath.”

I turn my back to him, walking back across the room to grab my drink. I down it in one gulp, letting the burn center me. I knew the ramifications were going to be bad, hence the drinking, but that’s what I do. I act. I *react*. I let that tangled up anger inside me take control. I let it command me instead of the other way around.

“He was insulting *our* girl.“ I make sure to put emphasis on the word ours to remind Harlow that he’s been her safe place her entire life and he needs to remember that.

“Oh, well that explains it,” he says, voice dripping with sarcasm. “Because it’s perfectly rational to fucking torture someone for flinging insults.”

Carefully setting my glass down I turn to face him. He’s moved up behind me, still seething with rage but he’s a good two inches shorter so I look down my nose at him and he backs off. “Do you know Cora blackmailed him, so he’d go back on the marriage deal?”

Harlow reels back, brows knitted.

“Zane started singing sweetly. Told me about how he told Rune everything she asked him to. She’s blackmailing him.”

His features contort, moving from confusion to a realization then to fear. “She knows.”

Now it’s my turn to look confused, as I sort through everything I know in my head. “Cora knows Rune killed her mother, yes. She told Striker that Rune told her when he became her guardian.” I almost say that he used this fear tactic, emotional manipulation, and abuse to keep her in his control, but I don’t. That’s not for me to tell Harlow. If she wants him to

know, she will tell him. “But I don’t believe she knows *how* he killed her,“ I add. “Or Zane’s involvement.”

Harlow scoots around me and sits on the sofa, heaving out a sigh. “She knows that Zane was involved with her mother. That’s why she met with him today. She just doesn’t realize that Rune already knows Zane was screwing his partner’s wife all those years ago.”

I sit down next to him, my head reeling. If Zane was fucking her mother fifteen years ago, that means…

That means he knows *everything.*

“I’m assuming you were smart enough to make sure he couldn’t identify you,” Harlow says, picking up the bottle of vodka. When I scowl at him, he says, “Did you at least turn off the security cameras beforehand?”

“I disabled them after we got in the house.”

Harlow nods. “Good. At least we don’t have to worry about that. Does he know it was you?”

Me. As in Fallon’s soldier. His son. “He thinks Cora sent me to ensure he did as asked, but Rune will know it was one of us.”

Harlow gestures to the stairs. “Go get her, we need to sort out what we’re going to tell Rune.”

I glance up to the stairs, my head feeling a lot fuzzier than a minute ago. The adrenaline of the evening is wearing off and the revelation about Zane’s involvement with Cora’s mother, on top of the several drinks I’ve had, is making me feel off.

“Fine, I’ll go get her,” Harlow says, standing.

Panic slams into my chest. “Cora’s not here.”

“What the fuck do you mean she’s not here?” he shouts. “She wasn’t at my house, when I got back from meeting with Rune, so I assumed…” His voice trails off. “I swear to god that girl’s going to give me a heart attack.”

Him? I’m about to lose my mind.

“Wait,” I say, pulling my phone from my pocket. I pull up the app and check for notifications in case she went to Rune’s. Rune left hours ago and never returned. I regret not installing cameras around Harlow’s house. “Do your security cameras extend out to the road?”

Harlow pulls his phone out and thumbs through it. With a curse he pockets his phone, teeth grinding. “She hopped in an Uber.” He points to my glass, but his words barely break through the panic curling up like

snakes in my head. “Don’t drive. I have a feeling I know where she went,” he says, his calm demeanor settling my nerves a little.

On his way back to the bay door, he says over his shoulder. “Next time you get the urge to break shit, take a minute to breathe. I can’t have you going off the rails every time you get pissed off.”

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Chapter 43

Striker

A warm embrace. A gentle caress of fingers trailing over my jaw. Tracing my ear. Down the bridge of my nose.

"It's okay. I have you."

I recognize the voice, but it doesn't match the feel of the fingers trailing along my cheeks, to my lips.

He never touches me.

"Are you really here?" My voice is weak, raspy. When I open my eyes, it's so dark I can only make out his silhouette. Moonlight bleeds into the cavern around him, his uniform a ghastly blue hue.

"Yes," he whispers. "Don't die on me."

I shake my head. No. I don't plan on dying. Not when I've been fighting so hard to live. But his words don't sit right. He didn't say that to me that day he found me in the cave.

Someone else said it, years later.

On another day in this bloody place.

The day we lost a piece of our hearts.

He turns and moonlight hits his mask. I expect to see the all black mask like he wore that day, but it's the one I've grown so used to seeing over the years.

But it's not his.

I shake my head confused because time seems to be folding in on itself, mixing up days and events, when I realize my head's cradled in his

lap. Just like that day and the one before.

I'm so weak, I can barely move when I try to sit.

"No, don't move," he whispers. "I'm going to get you out of here. I promise."

He helps me sit. Stand. Things happen too fast. I can barely see in front of me, but I can feel his heat. The rough Kevlar of his vest under my palm. The course material of his uniform. His hand on my lower back now, another on my neck, checking my pulse.

In my head, I tell him I'm dehydrated so my pulse is too fast, but that's a lie. It's racing because of the way he's touching me.

"Did you get them?" I ask.

We did. We did. We did. His voice goes on like an echo.

His mask comes off and my chest caves in. I miss him so much. My heart picks up pace as I stare at his lips. We're so close I can feel his breath on my face. Taste the air he's exhaling, filling my lungs with spice and smokey sin.

When his mouth brushes mine, I freeze. It's just a whisper of flesh against flesh, but it sends fire through my blood, and I feel suddenly alive.

Awake.

I bolt up in bed, my fingers brushing my lips, eyes blinking to focus in the dark room. Next to me Delilah grumbles and sits up, running her hand up and down my back.

"Are you okay?"

She's comforting me. The thought sends a weird pang to my chest. The idea she's trying to calm me, thinking I need comfort is a testament to her beautiful heart and to how much we've managed to manipulate her emotions.

That has to be it. She may trust us, may believe we have Cora's and her best interest in mind, but can she really have feelings that are true? Her own? Fucking her, claiming her body, her mind, training her for our mission, is so vastly different from owning her heart.

Yet, I think we do.

"What's wrong," she whispers.

"Bad dream," I lie, pulling her to my chest as I lay us back down. "Just a bad dream."

"I have them too," she says, lips brushing my bare chest. "About my mother."

That pang returns but it’s harsher, more painful. More like a stabbing.

“It was my birthday,” she says. “Rune wasn’t even there. He didn’t see it happen.”

My stomach revolts. My eyes move to the crown molding.

“I hated him for a long time.” The confession leaves her with a rush of air, like this is the first time she’s said the words out loud, or even allowed herself the freedom to think it, feel it. “That he wasn’t even there, and it was more than likely his fault she was killed. It should have been him.”

I say nothing, letting her talk even though it feels like my heart’s being cut open with every word.

“As I got older, I told myself it was part of this life. This is what every family like ours deals with. Rivals. Death. Revenge.”

Another slice.

“It’s a constant scramble to maintain power and make more money, take more control,” she says. “But I didn’t get to choose my family. I was born into a world of power hungry men who kill and steal and commit atrocities every day. And that’s what made me even more angry. I didn’t have a choice, so I was forced to adapt.”

And then we came in and give her no choice. We snatched her away and destroyed her entire life. Now we’re asking her to follow us blindly into a war. And she is. And maybe it’s for Cora, the hope we’ve planted to get Cora back and away from Zane, but she’s still following us. She’s still in this bed with me, stroking my chest, familiar with my body now.

Familiar with me.

Like we already own parts of her heart.

The thought of what we’d have done to her if she’d not followed us, if she had refused us and the mission, makes me sick. What would we have done? If she’d refused?

There’s a part of me that tink’s we’d have tried, yet we failed that first day in every way. Instead of have breaking her down, bit my bit until she was so fucking ruined she’d do anything for us, exactly as Fallon intended, exactly as he wanted, we found another way and it worked.

“And now,” she pauses, looking at up me, her warm breath on my jaw. “Now I hate him all over again. Hate him so much, I want him dead.”

My heart punches against my ribs.

“What was your dream about?” she asks, changing topics so abruptly my head spins.

“The day I almost died for the second time,” I tell her. *And the third*, but I don’t say that. Instead, I move over her, laying her back down beneath me as I pull her thigh up, hooking it over my hip. She gasps when my cock hits her and I moan when I find her already wet and ready.

“Are you sore?” I whisper. I’ve taken her so many times today, so greedy in my lust to have all of her that she must ache.

A slow smile spreads across her perfect lips, and I swear I think my chest both exploded and calmly fluttered from the sweet, slightly naughty expression.

“Yes,” she whispers back, “but it’s a good sore. I want you again.”

Reaching between us, she notches my dick at her entrance, and I drive in hard and fast. Her back arches, breath escaping her lungs with a groan.

“Striker,” she whispers.

“Princess.” I drive in harder. Her palm shooting up to brace the headboard.

“Will it be Reaper who kills him?”

I pause my movements, trying to pull out, but she stops me, gripping my ass to keep me buried deep between her thighs. “You want to talk of murdering your father while I’m inside you?”

I stare at her face, one side highlighted with moonlight the other shadowed. That soft look is gone, replaced with something I can’t name. Maybe she’s darker than we realized. While Cora has experienced horrendous things, as far as we know the only real pain she’s experienced was her mother’s death. God knows what she’s witnessed that we don’t know about.

She tilts her hips, trying to get me to move again, her pussy squeezing my cock.

“Rune Gavin is not my father,” she says, using my ass to pull me in deeper, little nails digging into my skin. “I may share his last name, but that’s it. I want the man who hurt Cora, who runs that lodge, to die.”

My cock pulses at her bloodthirsty tone.

“You’re a constant surprise, Princess,” I tell her leaning down to take her mouth as I start to drive into her again. “A constant, delicious surprise.”

***

I find her asleep when I return with the rag to clean her, so I leave our girl in bed, and search for Reaper. He's been hiding again, no doubt lost in thought, letting guilt chew him up over sending Cora away. When I don't find him in his room, or any other room in the house, I finally accept what I knew all along.

My bare feet pad across the cold tile floor and I stop in front of the small door leading to the cellar. I know he's down there, but I'm not sure how I feel about it.

With my stomach in knots, I open the door, the light from the little bulb at the bottom of the stairs confirming his location. When I reach the bottom step, my heart picks up pace, the dream filling my head with strange, confusing memories.

Hunter was the one who found me in the little cave that day all those years ago. I barely remember our time in the wilderness. Much like my life before the school, it's just fragments and smells. Strange sounds. The only vivid memory my mind has clung to was when he found me passed out from exhaustion and hunger in the back of that alcove. Even when the others arrived, I started floating again. Then the next thing I knew I was back at the school, and it was life as usual.

I've spent the last fifteen years with that fragment of memory. Hunter dragging me out of that cave living in my mind, holding on to it, examining it and what it meant. I knew he loved me in the way men love something they aren't supposed to want. Almost obsessively. Passionately. Even then, Hunter never hid his attraction for me, not even when I was a tad too young to be kissed by a man four years older than me.

Kiss. It was barely a kiss. More a caress of lips, full of relief.

"Are you going stand in the hall all night or come in?" Reaper asks.

I step into the room, but he doesn't bother looking over. He's sitting in one of the chairs lined up in front of the monitors, legs spread out, relaxed and arrogant.

Like he had a right to watch us.

"Did you watch us?" I ask. Something flares inside my chest. A strange sort of heat at the idea he's been sitting in this room watching me

take Delilah over and over. And before that, watching as Viper and I fucked her together. “The entire time?”

He nods but stays silent. His entire demeanor is off. A tad hostile. More so than usual.

“Then you know she asked for you,” I say coming up behind him. I grip the back of the chair, spinning him to face me, and lean over him. “And how sweetly she came for us.”

His jaw grinds as I step back. Reaper is a control freak, and we’ve never shared a woman without him. He directs us, and we follow him in all ways. I wonder which part is eating him up. That she wanted us so desperately or that Viper and I have changed.

After the last night with them, I am aware of how Reaper treats me differently. He always has. Especially when we’ve shared. I’m always near him, taking his commands, his attention. His touches. And he mine.

He still says nothing, his gaze moving over to the screen showing Delilah’s sleeping form, and the heat I felt turns to acid, anger making me tense.

“If you were watching us, why didn’t you come when she asked for you?”

Still nothing.

“Or did you not want to be in the same room when Viper sucked my cock,” I say, looming over him. “You didn’t seem to mind the idea of it a week ago.”

His eyes shoot over to me, narrowing, but then they trail down, over my bare chest to my waist. Lower.

I nod, taking a deep breath. My body lights up under his penetrating gaze. I’m used to Reaper. How he seems to see inside you, peeling back the layers and stroking all your dark pieces. How he seems to know you better than you know yourself. But this look is different. He’s *looking* at me. Not seeing me, like he’s seeing all my fucked up parts and trying to puzzle my motives or what I need. He’s looking, drinking in my skin. The scars. I think he sees something else too.

“Did you suck his cock too?” Reaper asks and my brows raise. “Did you like it? Did you like his cum in your mouth?”

My heart stutters. That heat flaring into something far more toxic than anger and desire.

The corner of my mouth tugs into a smirk. “Careful Reaper, I’m starting to think you want your cum in my mouth.”

Reaper unfolds himself from the chair, standing to his full height before me, our bodies just inches apart. He’s still wearing his all black training uniform and I wish he’d relax some. Put his regular clothes on. Get out of this mode he’s in. Mission. Training. Planning.

I miss seeing him calmer. Relaxed some. His eyes not so haunted. His jaw not so tense. He’s so stupidly handsome, it makes my chest ache. Especially when I see how tired he is. He needs sleep.

He’s giving himself away.

“I’m glad you two have worked your shit out,” Reaper says, throat moving as he swallows. Like he’s tasting the lie as he swallows it with the truth he’s refusing to speak. “Watching you pine for him has been painful.”

I quirk a brow. Right when I’m about to ask him why me with Viper upsets him now, and not before, he says, “Do not come into her room again tonight.”

Reaper shoves me aside and stalks to the door. My heart jumps. Maybe I was wrong. Maybe he wasn’t upset at me with Viper, and the reality that I want to share my body with another man isn’t what’s giving him that dark, haunted look. Maybe it’s something to do with her. Maybe he’s not jealous of Viper. It could be he’s envious she trusts me so much.

“Don’t hurt her in your need to own her,” I tell him.

He pauses and slowly turns to face me. “The fact you felt the need to say that, shows what little faith you have in me.”

“She asked for you Reap,” I say. “You know what that means.”

He says nothing because he knows it. We got what we wanted. Her body, her trust, and we’re well on our way, if not already, to possessing more.

“She’s fragile right now,” I say. “Bendable, breakable even. Her heart even more so.”

He steps forward, leaning closer to me, like he’s putting emphasis on his next words. “You don’t think I don’t know that? *We’re* doing that to her.“ He taps his chest. “*I’m* doing that to her.”

Take her. Train her. Do with her as you please.

Just get her prepared and willing.

We did that. More too. We could have treated her horribly, broken her down far worse than we did. But as the days went on we couldn’t do as

Fallon wanted. Not after years of being her shadow. Of learning everything there is to know about a person, and now we're in her head and carving away at her heart.

Maybe what we've done is far worse.

She's ours because she chose to be, and she doesn't know yet what we want.

"At least you're aware you're an asshole," I say. "Why she likes you, I'll never understand."

"No?" Reaper asks, cocking one of his perfect brows. "You like Viper." His face turns cold. "And you like me."

"You know why I do."

I didn't think it was possible to get under Reaper's skin, but I just did. And I used a scalpel to do it. His jaw grinds, eyes flaring with an odd combination of anger and disappointment.

The statement was cruel, so I add, "You're my favorite brother."

He relaxes some and turns toward the door. "Striker you've never been my brother."

I flop back in the chair, his words making my stomach dip.

When he's halfway out the door he stops, looking over his shoulder. "Do not come into the room," Reaper says again. "No matter how loudly she screams, no matter how much you hear her beg, do not open the door."

As he walks from the room, I think I understand for the first time in my life how much we deceive ourselves on a daily basis. Reaper lies to himself constantly, hiding desires and his heart, but I lie too. I lied to myself for years about my want for Viper. For Breaker. And I lied to myself about Hunter. I loved him but refused to explore what it meant.

I won't do that anymore.

Just like I won't lie to myself and let my brain recreate memories to suit what I think I should remember.

It wasn't Hunter who found me that day.

It was Reaper.

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Chapter 44

Delilah

I'M NOT SURE WHAT wakes me up—a creak in the floor, the wind rattling the window—but my eyes open, and I sit upright, heart beating wildly in my chest like angry bees. My gaze lands on him and I relax.

I *relax.*

The fire died hours ago, the only light in the room the bright moon's glow pouring in through the open curtains, drenching the room in a gauzy white haze. Reaper's mask glows, his eyes just a black hole sucking me into his vortex. He's sitting in the chair with legs spread wide, arms hung loosely over the armrests, watching me. I feel his gaze slipping, dipping, moving over me, almost caustic with its intensity.

I'm not sure why he's here, not talking. There's a fleeting thought that maybe he's come to deliver more bad news. That he's going to tell me to get dressed and lead me downstairs to break my heart and mind all over again. But there's something about the way he's sitting—he looks almost defeated.

Or maybe it's acceptance.

I take a breath. Acceptance. I know that feeling all too well. That unfolding of oneself, giving in to your most basic desires. Finally allowing yourself to have all the things you've denied.

Flinging the covers back, I crawl to the end of the bed, not caring about my nakedness. He's already seen so much of me, exposed parts that

lived inside me, my bare flesh is nothing compared to the wild things he's ripped from my marrow.

When I reach the end of the bed, I kneel with my hands in my lap.

Waiting.

Waiting.

That's what I've done since they've taken me. Waited for their next move. Waited for answers. Waited for Cora. Waited for them to touch me again. To take what they wanted so I could finally have want I craved.

Them.

Striker was right. It's easier when someone takes, forces you into submission, rather than risking giving yourself to the wrong person. I've already done that—given my entire life to men who don't deserve to be in the same space as me.

Dave. I gave him a year of my life, my devotion. He gave me lies and deceit. A broken heart.

Rune. I've given him my entire soul. He is the essence of me, of who I thought I wanted to be. I gave him that. The only thing that a daughter can give her father. Idolization, loyalty, never-ending devotion and complete and utter trust.

And he never deserved it.

I don't know entirely if Reaper deserves me. If any of them do. But there's a soul deep want that needs them to be deserving of this terrible tenderness growing in my chest. This painful ache that is so desperate for him to be everything he promised.

Mine. Hers.

Our revenge.

Reaper lifts one hand, turning his palm up and he crooks his finger, telling me to come to him. Just like he did in the club, sealing my fate.

My feet hit the cool wood, and I walk over, slowly, letting him see every part of my skin visible in the darkness. Light glints in his black eyes as I move closer, hungry gaze eating up the sight of my body. My breasts, how my nipple's have grown tight, not just from the slight chill in the room but from his nearness. How I walk, hips swaying, legs feeling slightly loose from the many times Striker's fucked me today. The new, confident way I stand before him after finally getting what I wanted.

It's a heady feeling, realizing they desire me, crave my body and mind as much as I want them. That feral woman they created has been

starved after being denied any pleasurable touch, and she's greedy. She wants more.

She, *I*, want *him.*

"You've been avoiding me," I say, stepping between his spread thighs, until my legs hit the chair.

Black eyes rove over me again, one hand lifting from the armrest to skim over my outer thigh, fingers leaving fire in their wake. His head drops back to the chair, and he looks up at me. "Have I?"

I narrow my gaze, knowing he can see my irritation. It's strange standing over him like this. Every interaction I've had with him, even straddling his lap as he fucked me, he's been in complete control.

Maybe he still is, this false sense of being above him is really just Reaper allowing me to stand before him. Like in the club, when Striker told me the only reason I was on Reaper's lap was because he put me there.

"Has my pretty Kitten missed her captor?" His voice drip with arrogance. With *knowing*. "Is that why you asked for me?"

It takes a second for his words to register. "You watched us?" I ask, my skin flushed with heat as I step away, my body liking the thought of him watching us today, but my mind confused on whether it feels like an invasion. But I did want him there, watching, seeing me getting fucked by Striker and Viper. His hands on me, being a part of my most vulnerable moment.

He says nothing for a heartbeat, then, his voice a raspy whisper, "I'm always watching, Kitten."

My heart flutters, a million butterflies beating their wings against my heart.

Always watching. Always near.

And he's here, right now.

Using his boot, he taps the inside of my ankle. "Open for me."

Reaper commands. Everyone follows. If I want this, want *him*, I'll follow his lead.

I spread my legs until my bare feet hit his boots.

Striker has fucked me so many times today, the last time not that long ago, I can still feel the remnants of his cum sticking between my thighs. Reaper's gaze drops and I wonder if he sees them glistening with Striker's release. The thought beats a heated path to my lower belly. My body is sore, but I still hunger for more.

“Let me see,” he says.

My brows knit, confused. Then I realize what he wants. Slowly I trial my fingers over my thigh, then drag them up between my legs, stopping at my pussy, liking how his eyes grow even hungrier at my teasing. How his hands grip the armrest like he’s stopping himself from reaching for me. Two fingers slip between my folds, and I dip them into me, moving them in and out, coating them. I hold them out for him to see, slick and wet.

“Taste.”

I suck my fingers into my mouth, tasting the musk and salt of us together.

“Do you like the way he tastes?”

“Yes,” I breathe, licking my fingers clean, watching his eyes, how the moon catches the darkness, creating a flickering wickedness to flare each time they move. “I like the way you all taste.”

He lets out a strange sound, almost like a strangled burst of air, escaping him unchecked as his gaze drags from my lips to my eyes.

“Turn around and walk to the end of the bed,” Reaper says, voice low.

I hesitate, but instead of asking why, I do as instructed.

“Hands on the railing.”

Another slight hesitation, but I wrap my fingers around the cool metal rail and wait. My heart hammers, unsure what he wants me to do. Or what he plans to do with me.

I feel him move up behind me. My skin pricks with awareness. Heat radiates from him, seeping into my back as he steps closer.

“You took their cocks so well, Kitten.” Fingers trail along my spine, then my hair’s brushed over my shoulder so tenderly goose bumps form. Reaper runs his fingertips up the lines of my back to my neck. When he grips my hair at the nape, shoving me down until my chest hits the metal rail, I let out a sharp gasp, my pussy throbbing. His free hand trails down my back again, running over my ass cheek. “You rode Striker’s face so hard, just like our perfect little slut.”

My face grows warm. The thought he sat somewhere watching feels absolutely sinful.

Reaper strokes my ass cheek with his free hand, practically petting me. A light tap to my rear makes me jolt. Another, slightly harder one creates a warm tingle between my thighs.

“And you still wanted more, didn’t you?”

I don’t hesitate. “Yes.”

“And then you took them both, fucking them so beautifully. One cock in your perfect ass, one in this tight pussy.” His fingers skims along my entrance and I rock back into his touch, but he denies me, removing his hand before I can get any friction.

His palm lands down again on my ass cheek, slightly harder this time. He rubs the sting away then does it again. “Such a dirty girl, wanting two cocks at once. And you still wanted my cock didn’t you?”

My eyes squeeze closed, hands gripping the rail harder. “Yes,” I rasp.

“Fucking your throat?” he asks

The admission slips from me. “Yes.”

A rumbling sound in his chest tells me he likes that answer. When his palm lands again, a dark tangled desire blooms between my thighs. I don’t know how my body is still capable of this level of arousal. I feel so used, yet, still so starved. Reaper’s dark touch is driving that same need I had earlier even higher. In some remote part of my mind, I fear maybe they fucked with my head too much that first week and I’m broken, but it shatters when another harder spank lands on my ass.

“You’ve been such a good girl,” Reaper rasps, his hand tightening in my hair. His hips jut forward, grinding his hard length into me. “Taking orders. Training. Taking what you want. Riding their cocks so hard, driving them crazy until they filled you up.”

Another slap to my ass has me groaning.

Fingers dip into the dimples on my lower back, then glide up my spine making my nipples tighten even more. The need to have his hands on me, claiming every inch of skin has me squirming.

“What a good little Kitten, taking their cum so sweetly. I loved watching you whimper and moan and fuck them. You’re such a beautiful girl.”

His praise blooms in my chest like a new flower bursting open with the sunlight.

“Do you think you deserve more?” he asks. “You’re already so full of cum, your pussy is weeping with it.”

“Yes,” I breathe. “Please.”

My head snaps back, breath bursting from my lungs. Slickness heats between my thighs from his rough touch.

“Greedy, greedy, girl,” Reaper grates, his grip in my hair tightening. “If you want my cock, you’re going to have make those begs convincing.”

I bite my lip, the pull of him creating this bone searing need to please him, yet the stubborn, defiant woman who is always in control whispers not to give him what he wants.

Because what if he takes too much? What if I give too many pieces to Reaper and I lose myself? I can already feel the fragments that Striker has imbedded inside my heart. I trust Striker I realize. Completely. They’ve all shown me parts of myself while giving me glimpse of who they are, but Striker’s the one who’s stayed with me. Kissed me, shown me his trust in me by removing his mask and letting me see him.

Not just his face, but his heart.

I know next to nothing about him, where he came from, what he endured in his life, but I know his heart is good. I feel it. I see it in his promises, in the tender way he caresses me. How he so openly accepts every part of not just his brother’s but himself and Cora.

Breaker’s let me see him. He’s made me promises, claimed me ,and left to keep my heart safe after she was ripped away.

Viper’s given me pieces of himself, but still holds me at a distance. Like maybe he’s too scared to let me see him.

Reaper takes. I feel like I’ve already handed over so much of myself yet he’s asking for more, giving me so little in return.

“Kitten,” he growls, masked mouth brushing along the side of my neck, harsh with unspoken desires. “Tell me what you want.”

Pulling in a deep breath, I ease back into him, relenting. Accepting. “I want you.”

A heart beat passes.

Another.

This thing between us feels wild. Like gnashing teeth and harsh bites. Feral with its intensity. Primal in its craving.

Then the grip in my hair loosens and his hand snakes around my throat. I cry out in shock as he drags me back, pressing me to his solid chest.

Hot breaths on my ear. “Say it again.”

There’s an edge of something close to desperation in his tone, something possessive and twisted that sends a skittering fear through me. It lands low in my belly, pooling with desire, tangling with need.

My heart pounds, that feral thing inside me craving more. “I want you. All of you.”

Gripping my arm, he turns me to face him, keeping his large hand at my throat. His dark eyes search my face, dropping to my mouth, moving over my cheek to my brows and then to my eyes.

I think he likes what he sees by the way the moonlight glimmers in the darkness.

“Do you trust me, Kitten?” he asks, voice barely a whisper.

A shiver moves down my back. His brothers trust him implicitly. Cora trusts him. I trust him to follow through as best he can. My heart though? I have a feeling he’s capable of wrecking it.

“I trust you with my body,” I say.

Reaper’s hand drops. The way he stiffens makes me think I found another way to penetrate his steely facade. He *wants* me to trust him. Not just with my body but with all of me.

He draws in a breath. His touch feathers down my arm. That skull face smirks and screams.

“You say want me, but I don’t think you know what you’re asking for,” he says. “I’m made from something evil. Born with the taste of death on my tongue.”

The fingers skimming my arm move to slip over my collarbone, the gentle caress so at odds with his words. My pulse threatens to explode when he moves closer, weaving both hands into my hair, yanking my head back. My body arches into him, feeling heat and hardness press into my belly. Reaper brushes his masked lips over my exposed throat.

His breath heats my skin. “You still want me, Kitten? Even though I’m nothing but death and destruction?”

Liar. He’s more.

My palms land flat on his chest. He stiffens, but relaxes as I ease them lower, feeling the hardness of his body, dipping my fingers into the curves of muscles, letting them skim his nipple under his shirt.

I drop my hands to my sides. This craving in me is so raw, so primitive, that in this moment, I don’t care if he ruins me.

“Yes,” I breathe.

Easing his grip in my hair, he stands to his full height, looming over me.

I should be scared of him.

I should be a lot of things.

“I’ll be gentle with you this time,” he says, voice dripping with darkness.

This time.

“Tonight, you will submit. Everything.”

My heart races.

“Go lie down on your back.”

A throb pulses in my clit. I do as asked, stepping away from him and lying on the bed, flat on my back, heart thundering, stomach heated yet dipping with nerves when he walks toward me.

I’ve been with Striker alone, but I wasn’t nervous. I felt that gentleness in him that first night. He’s so in tune with me, knowing when I need a soft touch, knowing when I need that feral thirst quenched.

Reaper has feed me small bits of his gentle side, but I know it’s there. I don’t know which man I’m going to get now. The one who holds me down forcing me to admit what I want or the man who craves me to the point he hates me for it.

I know how he feels.

This needy ache for him leaves me resentful.

“Grip the headboard,” he says, leaning over to grab something. When he pulls the rope Striker brought in this morning from under the pillow my face heats. He really was watching. “I’m going to bind you to the bed, and spread you open for me. Then I’m going to blindfold you.”

My heart rate kicks up higher as I whisper, “Okay.”

“Just okay?”

“No. I mean yes, do it.”

Reaper wraps the rope around one wrist. I look up angling my head to watch as he guides it through the railing and then wraps it round my other wrist, effectively tying my hands to the railing. The hard tug on the rope as he tests the restraints confirms I’m not getting free, making my stomach drop.

“Spread your legs.”

My heart thrashes, a wild thing in my chest. I lick my lips, taking a deep breath, but do as he asks.

“Good girl,” he says. “I’m not going to hurt you, Kitten.”

The truth in his words skim over me. “I know.”

When he walks back to the chair and picks up a set of black leather cuffs that had been hidden behind him, my heart leaps into my throat.

He came prepared. Ready for this. Forcing me to admit it out loud. Knowing I wanted him.

Without a word, he moves to the end of the bed and straps one cuff on my ankle then loops the chain around a pole and clips it to itself. The leather is cold, his hands warm as he slides one gently over my ankle to make sure it's secure. He then tests the strength of the chains, tugging hard, metal rattling. Reaper grips my other ankle and drags my legs open, spreading them so far apart I'm completely exposed to him.

Exposed and vulnerable. He wanted my trust. This is it. Me splayed open, at his mercy. My body ready for him to use as he pleases. And I'm giving him that power, trusting him not to abuse it. Maybe I've trusted him all along.

Once I'm bound to the bed, he leans on the metal railing of the footboard, hands gripping tightly, eyes eating up the sight of me. "Look at how beautiful you are. Spread open for me. Ready for my cock. Pussy so wet, I can see it dripping from here."

Another, deeper warmth spreads through my chest at the way he's so openly praising, looking hungrily yet appreciatively at my body, my face. Me.

Reaper stalks toward me, watching how my body stiffens. "Why are you scared, Kitten?"

"I'm not," I lie.

He makes a *tsking* sound. "You're a terrible liar, sweet girl. We need to work on that."

Sweet girl.

I think I like that. I think I want to be his sweet girl.

From the table next to me, Reaper picks up the blindfold. I meet his eyes in the dark. He's just a solid dark mass, glimmering black diamonds for eyes.

He's been a wild fling, my captor, my lover.

Mine.

"Are you ready for me, Delilah?"

My name.

Me.

I release a breath, letting all that caged up resentment toward him, all that fear and longing, go. “Yes. I’m ready.”

With out another word, he places the fabric over my eyes and ties it behind my head, throwing me into utter darkness.

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Chapter 95

Delilah

EVERY SENSE SNAPS TO awareness now that I can't see. My breaths quicken, and he must sense my nerves inching higher because he runs a hand up my arm.

The chains rattle as I try to squeeze my legs together to ease the need growing hotter and hotter.

A faint click next to my head makes me jerk. "You turned the light on?"

"I did," Reaper says.

My cheeks burn, fire lancing through me, making my chest heat. I'm not sure why the thought of him seeing me in the light makes me feel so much more vulnerable. He's seen every inch of me.

There's a rustle of fabric, the familiar clinking of his belt coming undone. A slight thud followed by another. Then the bed dips and I feel his hands on my thighs as he settles between them.

"So pretty and pink," he says, his voice so gentle it makes me wonder where he's been hiding this man. Warm palms drag up my thighs, and I jerk when a finger skims my clit. "You're sore." It's a statement. "He fucked you so well, so many times."

Even though I'm blindfolded, I squeeze my eyes shut, my cheeks scalding that Reaper is between my thighs, praising the wet mess Striker left behind.

Reaper's finger skims my opening. My breath rushes out as he slides it in, angling it upward. "Fuck," he grates. "Your tight little pussy is drenched with cum."

I bite my lip to keep my whimper in my mouth. He drives in deeper, but just as slowly, hitting that spot low in my belly that sends fire though my veins. His name leaves me on an exhale.

"Does that feel good, Kitten?"

"Yes. More. Please. Harder."

Adding a finger, Reaper drives in harder. My back arches slightly. It all feels too intense, and he's only just begun touching me. He drives in again, picking up pace, sending that blooming ache higher and higher until I'm throwing my head back, gripping the rope attached to the headboard, trying to meet his thrusts.

I've been so used, so many times, that only a rough touch will send me over. Reaper drives those long thick fingers in hard, sending electric heat to my belly. His fingers curls and that electric jolt fires a pulsing wave of pleasure through my core, making my pussy clench.

"Don't come," he grates, but it's too late. It rolls over me, my back arching off the bed as my release unfolds. A harsh slap to my clit makes me cry out. "I didn't give you permission to come," he growls. Another slap and I jerk off the bed at the intense heat that sears through me. "If you want to come, you have to ask me. Do you understand?"

"Yes," I whimper, squirming, as I come down from my high, but I'm barely allowed any movement with my legs restrained.

When warm flesh hits my pussy, and a hot mouth encloses over my nipple, I suck in a breath, the scent of him invading my nose. Firelight and burning stars. Reaper's never had his mouth on me and my body stills as I try to absorb every sensation. His tongue flickering roughly, then teeth nipping. The warm press of lips as he takes the hardened bud between his lips. The harsh suck.

His rumbling groan moves through me, and he shifts, his flesh slicking over my wet pussy as he sucks my nipple back into his mouth. The thought that he's bare-chested, that I can feel his skin on mine sends a carnal hunger to zing through me. That his mouth is on me, licking, kissing places he's never tasted. His palms slipping up my sides, fingers dipping into my curves, then gripping both breasts in his large hands.

“One day I’m going to fuck these perfect little tits and come all over them,” he says. Teeth scrape my nipple then bite gently. “Then I’m going to watch our Baby Girl lick them clean.”

My chest squeezes, pussy clenching. “Yes,” I say, liking the thought of her tasting him on me. Liking that even though this is just us, she is still on his mind.

Reaper slips lower, his hot mouth trialing a line of fire down my stomach. When he reaches my belly button, I feel him press a gentle kiss right below it and every single cell in my body focuses on that one spot.

He moves lower.

My breath hitches.

Lips press to the skin just above the line of hair leading to my pussy.

It feels like someone’s sucked all the air from the room and set it on fire with how my skin heats and my lungs seize. Reaper has never had his mouth on me. Not between my legs, not my breasts, he’s never kissed me.

“I can’t wait to taste you, Kitten,” he purrs. “You smell so fucking good. I can smell him on your skin. Smell what a greedy girl you’ve been today, begging for all our cocks.”

“Yes,” I say because *holy shit*, yes I want more. I want his mouth on me.

A soft kiss lands on my folds, hot tongue parting me. His groan is enough to be my undoing.

“You taste like heaven,” he groans. “Like fucking absolution.” Then his entire mouth is on me and he’s sucking, licking, devouring me.

“Oh fuck,” I cry out, chains rattling as my heels dig into the bed.

“You want more, Kitten?” he rasps. “You want my fingers in this tight pussy, don’t you?”

It feels like the devil has control of my voice as my answer rips free. “Yes. Please.”

Reaper slips in two fingers, driving them in hard. Fast. His lips enclose over my clit, and he sucks. I scream out at the intensity of it, but he doesn’t let up. The wet sounds of him feasting fill the room, mixing with the slick sound of his fingers driving in and out and his rumbling groans.

“You taste so good, Kitten,” he grates. “Give me more.”

The thought that he can taste Striker’s cum still in me is so filthy, I buck into his mouth, a primal craving to have him consume me making all

thoughts splinter. A part of me is amazed at his hungry groans, every savage sound emitting from him making me even wetter.

"Oh fuck, yes," he grates. "Good girl, your pussy is so wet for me."

"Please," I cry all my focus on where he's eating me, fucking me hard with his fingers.

"You want to come?"

"Yes, please."

"You have to ask me before you come," Reaper growls around where his mouth is sucking my clit, then, "Don't you dare come without asking for it."

"Please," I whimper. "Can I please come?"

My chest expands, air trapped in my lungs, hips rocking to meet his mouth. My body so primed, ready to fall over that I feel like if I don't come now, I might shatter into a thousand pieces and never recover.

"Good girl, asking me so sweetly," Reaper praises between licks. "Come for me, Kitten. Come all over my tongue"

It hits me so hard, my back bows, the entire bed jerking and creaking from the force of my legs and arms constricting. Reaper's groan as I come just sends me higher. The constant rumbled praises coming from him making my legs shake, *Good girl. My sweet kitty comes to beautifully for me,* all while he drives his fingers in and out, not letting up.

"One more time," he grates. "Give me another."

Desperation claws through me. "I can't," I whimper, even though I feel that heat building again.

"Yes, you can," he says, sucking harder.

Moans leave me unchecked, my body winding up, pleasure coiling deep in my bones, but I need something else. Something I don't even know how to name.

"Please," I beg.

"Tell me, Kitten."

I can't. I need more. But the words don't leave me. "Please."

"Please what? Use your words."

"*You*." The word is just a breath.

"Me what?"

Take me. Use me.

Want me.

Keep me.

Tears dampen the mask.

His lips clasp over my clit.

“*Please*,“ I scream. “Can I come again, please?” But it’s just a tangle of words and sobbing cries.

He releases my clit just long enough to grate out, “Yes, my sweet girl, come for me again.”

I shatter, nothing existing but the starlight flooding through my veins. His mouth. His fingers. Him and me and this black hole that’s swallowing me alive.

I come back around to the sound of chains rattling. My legs are drawn up to my chest, Reaper holding me open for him. Hardness hits my clit.

“Come on, Kitten give me more.”

I feel myself nodding. Y*es. Yes. You can have everything.*

When he drives in I cry out from the shock of being so full so fast, the pain of him hitting deep, so sharp, the stretch of him inside me too much. The hair on his thighs hits the back of my legs, calloused fingers gripping me tightly.

“*Fu-ck*,“ he breathes, voice raspy. “You’re so tight. So wet and perfect.”

I whimper, unable to form words.

“Oh, Kitten.” Reaper starts to move, each stroke hitting deep, hard. Harder. Faster. “Oh, *fuck*.”

With tears soaking the blindfold, whimpers slipping out with each harsh thrust of his hips, I wrap my fingers around the rope and hang on. There’s a terrible ache in me, but I don’t know how to soothe it. I just know I need more of him. He’s consuming, owning my body, but it’s not enough.

Reaper’s grip tightens on my thighs. “Are you going to let me spread you open like this for Striker?”

“Yes,” I moan.

“You want to come all over his cock again? Tied up and dripping with my cum?”

“Yes.”

“Viper?”

“Please, yes.”

“Breaker?”

I can only manage a whimper, the images he's planting searing through me.

"Our Baby Girl? Are you going to come all over her tongue? All over her pretty little fingers?"

"Yes," I sob.

"You're going to kiss her, and lick her pretty little clit, and show her how much you missed her when I get her back."

It's not a question. It's a command. "Yes," I weep, my chest tightening and expanding all at once.

He drives in harder. "Oh, fuck. I want to feel you come on my cock, Kitten. Give me another one." He groans, hitting in so deep I cry out from the pleasure twisted with pain.

A hand weaves around my throat, fingers digging into my pulse. It squeezes. Presses hard. Air gets trapped under his grip.

"Fucking mine." The slick sound of flesh on flesh fills the room as he fucks me harder. "Say it."

"Yours," but I can barely get the words out.

"Ours." The pressure eases and fingers slip between my lips, hooking my jaw. "Say it."

It's impossible to form words with his fingers in my mouth but I try. It comes out garbled, yet he still praises me.

"That's right, my sweet girl. Ours." His voice is strangled, broken groans fracturing his words as he drives in harder. A sting of pain sears through me but it tangles up with the desperate ache inside me, heating it until it's molten pleasure. "You. Belong. To. Us."

His fingers leave my mouth, dragging wetness down my body to my clit. I hear him spit. Wet heat hits my pussy then a finger circles it over the too sensitive nub.

It's too much. Too good.

"Please." The word breaks on a scream. "Please let me come. *Please.*" My pussy clenches, and I tumble over, my mind breaking apart, a splintered cry filling the room.

I don't know if he gives me permission because the world disappears and it's just him moving into me, my orgasm ripping apart my body, destroying me.

Faintly I hear his gravelly moan, then, "Oh, fuck. Squeeze my cock. Just like that." Reaper's finger stops circling, and I feel his thumb hook my

cheek. My head is jerked to the side, exposing my neck. Instinctively, I clamp my lips around it, sucking, tasting sweat and male and wild heat. His body molds to mine and his hot tongue glides from my collarbone up to my neck, leaving fiery heat in his wake. Teeth dig harshly into my flesh as Reaper latches on, savagely biting my neck.

I cry out from the pain of his bite, my walls clenching, my body thrumming from the possessive claim.

A shattered groan breaks free as he drives in once, twice, then stills. The moan that comes from between his teeth is purely animal. Heat floods me, his cock pulsing deep inside me. Then I feel him collapse, his thumb slipping from between my lips.

Slowly, he releases my neck, pushing off me enough that he's no longer crushing me. Hot breaths fan my lips. Teeth nip at my collarbone. My jaw. Tears soak the blindfold, and I realize I'm gasping out choked sobs, my entire body shaking from how brutally he's claimed me.

Reaper's hips start to move again, slowly, as his cheek presses to mine, lips brushing my ear, soft strands of hair brushing my face. heavy breaths fanning over my hot flesh.

"Such a sweet kitty." His voice is raspy, almost shattered. "You took me so well, Kitten, coming for me over and over."

I nod, whimpering, needing his soft praise to ease the pain in my chest.

Reaper's cheek rubs against mine, stubble grating my skin. "Do you feel my cum, throbbing deep inside you?" His hips move, pushing his cum in deeper.

"Yes," I breathe.

"We're going to keep you filled up, so full our cum, you'll feel with every step that you belong to us."

I slide my legs down, wrapping them around his waist, crossing them to keep him pinned inside me. My silent answer to keep me. Fill me. Give themselves to me like I have with them.

Him. I want him.

I feel him everywhere. His chest to mine, stomach slicking with sweat as he rocks into me. Lips brushing my skin. Hot breaths on my face. His heat and sweat and woodsy scent filling my lungs. It's an assault to my senses, how much he's owning me, yet he still feels so far away.

He pulls back, breath hitting my face. Warm lips skim over mine. It feels like an end and the thought makes my heart shatter.

“Reaper, please.” I choke on a sob, my heart, my body, my soul in ruins.

“Please what, Delilah?”

My voice cracks. “Please, kiss me.” I need him to kiss me. I need this to be more than another rough fuck. He’s promised me, claimed me, but I need more.

I need that gentle touch. That soft claiming like Viper and Striker gave me, but I need it from Reaper. Desperation makes my sobs grow stronger.

“So greedy. You’ve had my mouth.”

“Please.” All dignity has vanished. He’s broken me down, flayed me alive. I’m his.

I’m theirs.

They can all have me.

Just please kiss me.

Fingers weave into my hair. His breath touches my lips. Darkness and sinful lust. “If I give you this, what do I get?”

“Me,” I whisper. *All of me.*

Reaper’s lips brush mine. “Yes, Delilah, all of you.”

Then his mouth encloses over mine, tongue darting past my already parted lips, tasting, taking, claiming, starved for every thing I have to offer. His firelight taste floods my senses. He devours my groan, hands tangled in my hair, angling my head so he can take more. Consume more.

This kiss feels like a fall from grace. I tumble willingly, giving myself over to this burning thirst. Spiraling downward, I struggle against the restraints, wanting to touch him, needing to feel his skin, run my fingers in his hair. Have more of him.

But he won’t let me.

When he breaks the kiss, I hit the bottom, my body crumbling, my chest constricting, knowing this is it. He’s pulling away. The little bit he just gave me is all I get.

I feel him shift. He slips out of me as he sits up, cool air hitting my body. Feel the bed jump and dip as he stands, then unties the rope, rubbing my wrists to soothe them. Reaper lets me go, and I roll to my side, curling into a ball as he strokes my back. I want to remove the blindfold, but I

know he doesn’t want me to see him and that’s what hurts the most. He wants to own every piece of me but refuses to give me a glimpse of who he really is.

“What do I get?” I whisper.

His light stroking stops, then continues after a second. “Us.”

“When?” I ask. “When do I get all of you?”

I hear him exhale. Take a deep breath. “The more you know about us, the less you’ll want to be ours.”

That’s for me to decide not you, I think, but I remain quiet.

We stay just like that, him sitting behind me, stroking my back until the hurt fades. Until I’m capable of reminding myself this isn’t *more*, even though my heart aches for it. I remind myself I have Striker and Viper’s affection. I have Breaker. I have my beautiful Cora. And I will get her back to me safe. I remind myself of all these things, until I fall asleep, the taste of him still on my lips.

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Chapter 96

Breaker

15 Years Ago, September, Age 13

WE'VE WALKED FOR MILES today, Viper pushing us to move faster after what we saw. He's got this frantic energy to him that tells me he's scared. I don't he's scared for his life. He's terrified that something going to happen to us. That whoever killed that man is going to get ahold of Striker and me and gut us. Skin us. Rip us apart and leave us for the animals to eat.

"Do you think if we head further west, we'll find the cave Hunter mentioned?" I ask.

Viper's heavy footfalls stop, and I crash into his back.

"What cave?" he asks, turning slowly to face me. His blue eyes land on me, lit with anger. "Please, tell me *now* about a fucking cave."

I glance at Striker who's sinking to the ground, weary from walking. His eyes have that lost look to them he gets when he's starts spacing out.

“You know, the cave that what Hunter told us about before they left,” I say, backing away as Viper takes a step toward me. His face turns hard, angry. I take another step back. “When he was packing to go on their mission.”

“Hunter told you about a cave?” Viper asks. The way his voice dips reminds me he was named Viper because he’s mean as shit when he wants to be. “And you’re just *now* telling me?”

“I didn’t think about it,” I stammer, backing away some more.

Viper drags a hand down his face, casting a worried glance in Striker’s direction. “Tell me what he said.”

“They stayed in like a cave, an alcove he called it. There’s water—”

“Dammit Breaker, I’m going to kill you when we get out of here.”

“—he said to head west. That the alcove was only a few miles from the lodge.”

“At least we’re going in the right direction,” Viper snaps, pulling Striker to his feet. “But we could be miles off since we can’t assume that they dropped us off in the same location as Hunter and Reap.” He looks around, keeping a hand on Striker’s shoulder. “I say we keep heading west. We’re bound to find something.”

“If we head west, we may run into the lodge,” Striker says. It’s the first time he’s spoken since we left that body behind hours ago. “Don’t you realize that’s where they are?”

They. The people who killed that man.

I feel the blood drain from my face, fear making my palms feel tacky. I rub them on my pants.

“But it’s also where they’ll go,” Viper says. “We have to find it so they can find us.”

“Who?” Striker nearly shrieks. This is the first time he’s freaked out. I have so much for so long I feel numb inside. “No one is coming for us, Viper. We’re out here and no one knows it.”

“Hunter and Reaper will come,” Viper says with such conviction I want to believe him. “Maxy sent us out here. You heard what those guys said.” His eyes collide with mine. “And what di Maxy say before he drugged you?”

“That he can’t wait for Fallon to know his son is out here.” I say. “Do you think maxim dumped us out here to piss off Fallon?”

Vipers jaw tics. “Yeah.”

“Do you think…” Striker doesn’t continue speaking. But he doesn’t have to. We’re all thinking the same thing.

We’re in the wilderness years too early, with a dead man tied to a tree a few miles back. Maxim didn’t bring us here just to piss Fallon off.

He brought us here to die.

The realization settles in my gut, making me feel sick all over again. Panic needles at my arms and I take a deep breath, trying to breathe through it as it wraps around my throat.

I don’t want to die, even though everything about me is a sin and I deserve it. My name. My skills. Even how I was born was wrong. My life was created in violence. My birth caused a death. The boy I like is my brother and that’s a sin all in its own. To have this want inside me whenever he looks my way.

I scan the woods around us. The trees are thicker, but spread further apart, the terrain changing from rich to rockier as we traveled. We don’t know the terrain, but it feels like it’s getting colder, like maybe we’re climbing higher in elevation. I glance up at the darkening sky. We’re going to have to find a place to sleep tonight, but the thought sends a chill down my spine.

Someone killed that man. And they may still be out here.

That’s when I see it.

A flash of red, like a scarlet web strung on the low branches.

“Come on,” Viper says. “Let’s keep moving. If we can find the truck or the cave, we can regroup and form a plan.”

Striker nods, and moves ahead, but my feet are rooted to the ground.

“Breaker, come on.” Viper pulls at my arm.

My mind is too busy screaming in terror, to send any signals to my limbs. My feet don’t move. “Look,” I whisper.”

Viper turns, then stumbles back gripping my arm.

Striker hisses out a quite curse. “Tell me that’s not hair. I can’t fucking handle it, if that’s hair.”

We heard screaming last night. A woman. We found a man torn apart and tied to a tree.

Someone’s out here killing people.

“I know why Maxim brought us out here,” I hear myself saying a slight tremble in my words. “We’re his prey.”

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A scream jolts me awake. A hand covers my mouth.

"*Shh*," Viper whispers.

My heart clatters around in my chest, terror making my skin clammy. It's almost pitch black, barely any moonlight slanting through the trees. I can hardly see a foot in front of me, but I can make out Striker next to me. He slowly stands, peering around the tree we're hiding against. After hiking another hour, it was too dark to move safely, so when we spotted the upturned tree, we decided to stop. It's thick trunk and large gnarled roots protruding from the earth providing a place to hide.

Except, I'm not sure if its proving to be more of a cage than a cover.

To our left, a cracking *boom*, ricochets through the woods, vibrating in my ears like when we're at the range outside the school.

"Shot gun." Striker presses his back to the tree and slides back down. "Close."

"No shit," Viper hisses, his breath fanning my ear. Finally, he lets me go and I turn to face him. His blue eyes look dull in the dark night, but I can still see they're flooded with fear.

"We have two choices," Striker says, weirdly calm. "We can hide here and pray they don't find us or keep moving."

"In the opposite direction," I add.

"We need to find that fucking cave," Viper says, peering up over the large root behind him. Not like we can see much. "If they are out here shooting, that must mean we're close to the lodge, which means we're close to the cave."

"If we can make it to the lodge, maybe we can find a weapon," Striker says. "They obviously have them."

"That's literally the last place I want to go," I whisper. The thought of ending up anywhere near where those people are makes my stomach clench.

Viper rubs his eyes, moving to a crouch. Gripping a large root, he pulls himself up to look out. After a moment he crouches back down. "I don't see any movement. When we get up, stick close to the trees. Go slow, watch for branches and roots. And do not lose sight of me, got it?"

Striker and I nod. Viper squeezes our shoulders, then climbs through the large opening. I follow Striker out, moving in behind him, my back pressed to the tree as I stand. When he makes sure it's clear, Viper creeps to the next tree then the next and we follow. My heart hammers, the blue night enveloping us, but even with the veil of darkness, we're still exposed. Every time the clouds clear, bright moonlight spills between the branches making it feel like we're in a spotlight.

Viper creeps to the next tree, then the next, moving ahead of us to make sure it's clear. Striker follows, me last. Viper stops about thirty paces ahead, smashing himself against a thick pine as Striker creeps toward him, exposed between the trees.

The clouds peel back away from the moon and suddenly the woods are thrown into bright white light.

Somewhere, far behind us, a twig snaps. The sound echoes in the darkness like the crack of a whip.

I fall to my ass, heart in my throat. Striker drops to his stomach splayed out on the ground.

A thunderous *boom* followed by debris hitting my face, makes me duck low. I cover my head on instinct, flattening myself to the tree.

Someone just shot at me.

Another heart shattering gunshot echoes through the woods, and more wood splinters, spraying me with rough chunks.

Fear strangles me, taking over all instinct. So I stand up and do exactly what I've been told not to do.

I run.

And run.

Then my boot catches on a root and I stumble. My nose hits the dirt, hands barely breaking my fall. Scrambling upright, I wipe my palms on my pants, smearing warm wetness across my thigh. My heart gallops in my chest, and I fall back down, recognizing the deep color and how it glistens in the moonlight. How it spreads thickly, smearing over my skin.

My eyes fall to the ground and find the pool of blood.

Don't scream.

A hand covers my mouth, and pain explodes in my skull.

Then nothing.

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Chapter 47

Cora

CLYDE LEFT ME A couple hours ago. It's taken me only two hours to catch an Uber to my condo, change into clothes that didn't come from a Dollar General, and pack a few items in a bag so I have toiletries and extra clothes at Clyde's house. Even though we've not sat down to talk yet, I would bet every cent in my bank account he's not going to let me go back to Rune's house. Clyde walked in on Rune allowing, helping Zane hurt me.

He's not going to forget that.

Gathering a few more items, my laptop, an extra charger, and my favorite fuzzy blanket, I check the time on my phone. It's after midnight. Clyde left to talk to Rune around ten, and I'm surprised he's not called, screaming at me for leaving his house. It won't matter if I get back to his place before him, he's going to know from his security footage that I left his house.

I glance around my condo, my skin pricking with unease. It's obvious Rune came to look for clues after we were taken. The place is clean, a little too tidy, and all my things are just slightly out of place. My books rearranged from my pretty rainbow pattern, to complete chaos of blue books mixed with red. The pink vibrator in my nightstand moved. All my clothes are shoved to one side of my walk-in, the drawers rearranged. My fridge is empty and there's no dishes in the washer or the sink, so he must have had the place cleaned. Funny since he knew I was going to come back.

The thought settles oddly.

Before I can think too long on that, I hear the faint beep of the electronic lock on my front door, telling me it's been unlocked.

There's only three people besides me who know the code. I grab my bag and head to the foyer but drop it when I see him.

My stomach lurches. "Rune."

He doesn't say anything. Rune just shuts the door, slowly, making sure to close it quietly, then hits the button to engage the lock. The loud beep as it secures closed crashes through my skull.

When I first moved out he would always yell at me for leaving my front door unlocked. *Someone might come in and harm you*, he always said. *A young, beautiful woman, all alone? Anyone could just walk in.*

The irony never failed to slap me in the face. The only one ever hurting me was him, and the locks never kept him out.

He always had the key.

His blue eyes catch me. I take a step back. My bag hits the floor. I can almost taste his rage. It's tainting the air in the small foyer with its darkness. It's written in his frigid, precise movements. My arms prick with goose bumps as he takes a step forward.

"What are you doing here, Papa?" I ask.

He doesn't answer. But then men like Rune never have to answer to small, powerless women like me. Instead, he stalks forward, never looking away, keeping me trapped in place with the hatred burning in his eyes.

I don't have the chance to avoid the hit. The back of his hand connects with my cheek before I can even register what's happening. My eyes tear, face and nose stinging as I stumble back. My hand flies to my face, air sucking into my lungs at the shock.

"What the fuck did you do?" Rune grips my arm and drags me him. My palms land on his chest, finger curling into his suit jacket. "Tell me what the fuck you said to him."

Shit.

"I don't know what you mean," I gasp, looking up at him. *Lie, lie, lie*. I'm an excellent liar. "What happened?"

His brows knit, but he pulls me even closer, his face in mine. "Zane called it off. Tell me what you said to him."

I shake my head, trying to move away, hoping he thinks my racing heart is from the fear of his anger and not that Zane somehow managed to

figure out a way to rat me out without revealing himself. Zane's good at that.

"Why did he call it off?" Rune asks, shoving me away.

I stumble, my back hitting the console table. "He called what off? The marriage?"

Rune's eyes narrow as he scrubs a hand over his jaw. He's not shaved today and his salt and pepper stubble give his features a slight edge. "Tell me what you did."

"I didn't do anything," I say, putting my whole heart into the lie. "Why did he call it off?"

Rune huffs, eyeing me strangely.

"I can't say I'm mad about it," I say, smoothing my hand over my hair. "But I didn't do anything."

He points a finger at me, anger making his face red. "You better make yourself useful, girl," he grates, "because you just fucked me over a lot of money and a good connection."

I swallow, not liking the underlying meaning to his statement. Make myself useful. Isn't that what he's been doing with me for years. Using me?

He nods, like he's figured something out in his head, slowly, eyes tracking my every movement, every breath, and that oily fear returns. "What did the big one say to you before they sent you back?"

Reaper.

"Nothing," I snap, my gut twisting at the lie. "We've been over this. I don't know anything."

"You don't know why one of them attacked Zane?" Rune asks.

My stomach crashes down to my toes. "What?"

He takes a step toward me. I can't help it, I shrink back. The vase wobbles, and crashes to the floor. I nearly scream at the sound, my nerves frayed and raw.

"What happened?" I ask. "Is he okay?"

Jesus. Breaker. That's what I saw in his expression this morning. Complete and utter rage.

"He's in surgery," Rune says. "He may regain full use of his hand, if he's lucky."

My hand flies to my mouth. I'm not sure if I'm stifling a gasp of horror or a laugh.

Rune lets out a curse, then backs away dragging a hand through his hair. “I should have known he’d retaliate.”

I know better than to ask who or what he means, but the statement snags in my brain. He must think that their father sent one of the men to attack Zane as a payback for forcing them to return me. Little does he know they’re already at his doorstep, invading his territory.

Rune’s eyes drop to my bag and his jaw tics. I don’t know how Clyde’s handled what occurred last night, but I can guess he’s managed to keep his anger in check. I don’t even know if he’s confronted Rune yet. If he even will. The fact Rune and him have been friends for so long means Rune must be used to seeing Clyde’s anger and vice versa. It makes me wonder how many times Clyde has turned a blind eye.

He has, after all, been feeding Reaper and the men information on Rune’s criminal activity for years.

Activity about his lodge.

Reaper’s words flash in my head.

“Cora.”

My gaze darts to the living room. Rune is sitting on my couch. I was so lost in thought, I didn’t even notice him move.

He pats his lap. “Come here. Come sit on Papa’s lap.”

My heart kicks, my palms sweating, a different kind of fear settling in my gut.

“Come sit on Papa’s lap and talk with me.”

Make yourself useful.

Stupid, stupid, girl.

It never once crossed my mind what would happen if Zane called things off. I was so focused on not getting trapped in a nightmare that I failed to see the consequences of not complying with Rune’s demands. While I’ve ensured I’m free from Zane, I’m still trapped with Rune.

When I don’t listen, when don’t act like the girl he trained to be his sex toy, he bolts from the couch, stalking toward me with such anger, I freeze in place. He grasps my arm, mouth contorting into a snarl.

“Did you not want Zane because you knew we couldn’t play anymore?” he asks. Bile rises in my throat. “Is that why you fought me so hard? You would miss me?”

“No,” I hiss, glancing toward the door. How absurd this floundering hope in my chest. How stupid that I cling to the idea that maybe someone

will appear. Rescue me yet again.

But no one knows where I am.

Rune drags me with him, tugging me down as he sits. My ass lands on his erection and I have to bite my cheek to keep the tears back. “Papa, stop.”

“*Shh,*“ Rune whispers, his hand landing on my thigh, moving up toward my center. I squeeze my thighs together as his hand travels upwards, greedy fingers pushing between my legs.

Thank fuck I changed into jeans.

It doesn’t stop him from cupping me.

“Papa, please. Stop.” I hate myself for begging. He likes it, caves it, and I know it, but I can’t seem to stop myself. This feels so much worse somehow. So much more invasive and gross than before.

He leans in, wet lips brushing my ear. “Let your Papa play with you,” he whispers. “Let me play with my little girl the way you like it.”

My gut lurches, and I fear I may actually vomit. Rune’s nose brushes along my jawline, the movement tender, but he’s not being sweet. This is what he does before he unleashes his true self, and I end up having to stifle my screams.

Right on cue, his fingers weave into my hair and he jerks my head back. My arms fly out and I grip back of the couch to keep him from pulling me back any farther. “Does my little girl, not want to play?”

Play. How different a word can sound coming from a predator’s lips.

A tear slips out as I gasp, my head jerked back so far a sharp pain twinges in my neck. His fingers slithers over the seam of my jeans, moving up and down, stroking me, expecting me to give in and open like I did before I was taken. Spread my legs like his whore.

You’re ours.

I’m not his, my mind screams. I never was and I certainly am not now.

I belong to me.

And I gave this body, parts of my fucking heart, to them.

To Delly.

“Stop,” I say again, firmer this time.

He presses harder. Putrid breaths on my neck. Tongue slicking grossly over my throat.

My vision blurs. Tears leak down my cheeks.

“Stop,” I say again.

It all happens in a blur of movement. A chaos of sound. My hand hits his face. He grunts, letting me go. I push away and leap up. Run. A hand fists the back of my shirt. A shoe kicks at my ankles. My feet fly out from under me. A scream rips from my throat. Then, I’m down, cold marble tile meeting my face, my cheek hitting the floor. Pain making air suck into my lungs. Cruel fingers weaving into my hair. Agony exploding behind my eyes as my forehead hits the floor. Again. Again.

My vision moves in and out of focus.

Pain like a million exploding firecrackers in my head.

His hard body at my back. Moving over me. Hands on the waistband of my jeans.

Tugging. Tugging.

Air against my flesh. Fingers pulling me apart.

Heat and hardness and rage pushing between my ass cheeks.

No. No. No. But there’s no words. Just an anguished scream of a woman being brutally reminded of her place.

***

When my eyes open, I think for a minute that someone’s drilling into my head with a power tool.

“Don’t move,” a familiar voice says. Raspy. The voice is raspy, lined with pain. I want to tell him he doesn’t need to worry about me moving, but pain in my skull, in other parts as I try to move, makes my words come out in a pathetic whimper. “I think you may have a concussion.”

My eyes blink open and his face comes into view, a little blurry, but my body relaxes as his brown eyes look down at me, a frown tugging the corners of his lips.

“Clyde, if you keep making that face, it’s going to stay that way.” When I go to laugh bile rises in my throat and I lean over the edge of the bed and heave, but nothing comes up.

Black boots move into my line of vision.

Then I remember.

“Cora,” Clyde says his voice so gentle it may as well be coming from another man. “Can you sit up?”

“She needs to go to a fucking hospital,” Breaker says, anger and panic making his voice gritty.

“No,” I manage. “I’ve had worse.”

I swallow and do a mental check. My head fucking hurts, and I’m dizzy but I don’t think it’s a concussion. My throat feels raw and my…

I grip my pants and find them up and buttoned. terror makes my heart race. Shame makes my shin wobble. “Who found me?”

“Me,” Clyde says. I didn’t think my heart could hurt anymore but it does from the way his voice cracks.

Breaker drops to a crouch, but all I can see as I hang my head over the side of the bed are his large, strong hands. I love his hands.

“Did, he…” His voice trails off, but I hear everything he’s not asking.

Using every bit of strength I have, I sit up, doing my best not to wince at the pain. My eyes catch Clyde’s and my stomach sinks. I have no idea what state Rune left me in after I blacked out, but from the expression on Clyde’s face, he must have seen more than I would have liked.

The fact that Breaker is asking if I was violated means Clyde didn’t tell him. Smart man.

“Cora.” Breakers voice sounds like chipped ice. Hard and splintered. “Did Rune hurt you?”

Here’s the thing when men ask if you’ve been hurt. If you tell them yes, you’ve been violated, they question your perception. Was it that bad? Did you draw his eyes, his attention? What did you do? Did you anger him?

If you tell them yes, and you convince them that you weren’t the cause of being assaulted, you have to deal with their fury. It becomes so big, so all consuming, sucking up all air, leaving no room for your own. Their anger at your violation makes your rage so small.

The problem with Breaker isn’t that he won’t believe me. No. The problem is he will, he won’t even question it. Considering what he did to Zane for just trying to harm me, Lord knows what he’ll do to Rune.

And I can’t have that.

Not yet.

So, I meet his beautiful eyes, brush my thumb along the lips that have tenderly given me so much love and affection, and I lie.

“Rune didn’t touch me like that.”

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Chapter 48

Delilah

MY FIRST BODY GUARD arrived at our house when I was eleven. I'd never had one just for me before. Any time I left the house, I was with my mother, so her guard was my guard. And my private school provided enough security, I never needed my own.

He arrived the same day as my mother's funeral. The day was hotter than hell, even for mid-September in the southernmost part of the state, and the lace and satin black dress Clyde had told me to wear, stuck to my skin. I remember staring down at my patent leather shoes thinking that if my mom was here, she'd have wiped the dust from my shoes and told me to sit up straight.

So, I did it myself as we drove away from the cemetery in the heart of town.

Sit up straight, Delilah. And keep yourself together. If you're a mess on the outside everyone will think you're a mess on the inside too. People don't trust a messy woman.

I had asked Clyde for his handkerchief in his suit pocket, and he'd pulled it out slowly, watching me like one would a strange, wild creature as I cleaned the dust from my shoes, then folded the fabric neatly and tucked it into the handle of the limousine.

My mother liked things neat and tidy. She liked sunsets and silky dresses. She liked sweet tea with cut up lemon tossed in the top. She liked

pearls and lipstick and everything that was pure and good and she was taken from me by something I couldn't even see.

A bullet to the chest, then another to the head as she tied my shoes outside the restaurant I insisted we went to. All because I was spoiled and wanted the tiny pizzas they made that night.

All because I was born into a family that thrived on violence, and she was forced to marry my father and have me.

All because he wanted her.

I know this because Cora's mom said it once. Screamed it, in fact, over dinner one night while Cora and I were playing in the pool. Our parents had sat around the long table keeping an eye on us, drinking and laughing until something happened and Cora's mom stood up and pointed at mine and said, "You only have what you do because Rune was so obsessed with you and paid your family to marry you."

I never understood that statement until now.

How someone would pay a family to steal their daughter.

I was an only child. I didn't have cousins, only Cora. We weren't like the other families in my father's circle, although I saw how my father's associates married off their daughters, but I never thought twice about it.

It didn't affect me, so I didn't care.

Stupid, selfish me.

I care now. And I think about it constantly.

Cora's parents may be dead, but their family name and their fortune is not. And Cora is the only one left alive, inheriting it all. The shares to Rune's company, all her parents money and estates. And I've decided that when I return, it's all going to be mine and Cora and all can rule over the company my father built, the one he trained me how to keep thriving when he's gone.

Because my father signed his name on his death warrant the day he killed their brother. Reaper will kill him.

And I think he needs me to get close to him.

"You're not paying attention, Kitten," Reaper says, tapping my arm with his training knife.

I woke up to Striker in my bed this morning. My heart ached with hurt, Reaper's absence stung harshly, but the pain eased when Striker's smile tugged at the corner of his mouth as he pressed that mischievous smirk to my lips, weaving his fingers in my hair. When he slid between my

thighs tenderly stroking deep into me, thunder rolling in the distance, and rain pelting the window, warmth unfolded inside my heart and for those few moments, I was okay.

But when his skin left mine and the cold morning air seeped through the lust, I was reminded that Reaper left me. He *left* me after giving me those moments with him. After sharing such intense intimacy, Reaper waited until I was sleep and left me to wake scrambled and brimming with want. Desperate for more of him. Aching to be held.

Messy. He left me feeling messy.

I may not look messy, but I feel messy on the inside.

Since it was still raining, Striker and I skipped out on our morning run, and I pulled on a dress and found my green knitted sweater, my favorite fuzzy socks and headed downstairs. Instead of letting me have breakfast and maybe a day off, Striker appeared out of nowhere, and drug me to the large empty room where we've been training. Then he walked away. A few seconds later Reaper sauntered in, all arrogance and sex, and handed me my training knife.

"Where's Viper?" I ask, glancing over to the large window overlooking the drive so I don't get distracted by Reaper's tight shirt and pants and the undeniable heat in his gaze. Thunder rumbles in the distance, drops of rain turning the world blurry and gray.

"Not in here as you can see," Reaper says, pointing to the wood floor with his own training knife. I breathe out slowly, telling myself not to move closer. Not to press my body to his like a feral creature in heat. That was we shared last night was left in those moments. I'm starting to realize that is the only time I will get that part of him. When I submit myself fully and let him drink it from me.

My eyes flicker over to him as I tell myself these things. He's wearing his same long sleeved black shirt and fatigues. Same black leather boots. Same smirking skull mask with the melting jaw.

The only difference is I know how that body beneath his clothes feels pressed to mine, flesh to flesh. How his bare chest feels moving in over me as he thrust into me. How those warm soft lips I can't see feel between my thighs and pressed to mine.

"Kitten." Reaper's grumbling purr makes my eyes snap up to his. "Stop worrying about Viper and worry about my knife slitting your throat."

"I'm tired," I say.

The dark, hungry look flashing in his black eyes says everything he's not.

I let out a puff of air, eyes dropping to the floor, my skin flushing. It's absurd that I feel shy with him this morning, and the feeling creates a rush of anger to roil through my veins. Being vulnerable is difficult, especially since I've trained from an early age to be hard. Focused. Never allowing anyone too close because I saw what happened to the people I cared about. My mother. Boyfriends I attempted to have. The only people I was allowed to love were under my roof.

And now they are gone. Ripped from me like Reaper ripped my heart from me last night.

He taps my hand holding the knife and steps away, positioning his body like he's going to attack me.

I drop my knife and cross my arms over my chest.

"Kitten," he growls, but I shake my head.

Messy, scrambled and confused, yes, but not about how I feel. About why he's so hot and cold. Why he can't just give in the way he constantly expects me to give in, the way he forces me to give all of myself to him.

"Don't be a naughty girl," Reaper says, his dark tone entirely too sexy. "You know what happens when you don't follow my order."

"I get a spanking," I say, keeping his eyes locked on mine. He may have ripped my submission, my fucking truth out of me, last night, but I'll be damned if he thinks he has control over me. "And if I'm good, I'll be rewarded."

His eyes narrow even more, like he waiting for me to say more.

He needs me, I tell myself, even though my heart is racing at the thought of upsetting him. After last night, I don't want to break the fragile bond we've created. I have a feeling it will hurt too much.

But, taking a chance, I lean in and whisper, "If you, Reaper, give me answers you get a sweet kitty to play with."

His eyes drop to my mouth.

"Tell me the plan," I say. "I want to know what you expect me to do."

"No." His tone is hard, but I swear he's smirking.

"I'm not training, or shooting, or doing anything until you tell me what you plan."

Reaper takes a step back, running a hand over his mask, like he does when he's irritated. I'm shocked when his hand drops and he says, "Fine."

Oh. Okay. My shoulders ease. I had expected a fight. Or to be carried off and tied up somewhere for being defiant.

"Come with me," he says, stalking from the room, not bothering to look back because he knows I'll follow. I practically run behind him to keep up with his long legs as he walks through the house. When we reach the kitchen and he stops in front of the basement door, my heart stutters.

"What you want to show me is in the basement?" I ask as he pulls keys from his pocket and unlocks the door, then opens it.

He casts me a look. I don't even need to see his face to tell he's annoyed.

My eyes dart to the dark stairwell. "You've threatened to lock me down here," I remind him. "Excuse me if I'm hesitant."

"Kitten, I've had you tied up, legs spread open, and the worst thing I did to you was make you beg."

Scarlet. That's the color that flames over my cheeks.

Without another word, Reaper heads down the stairs. A light pops on, flooding the stairwell with light, and he disappears from my view.

My heart hammering, I take the stairs slowly, telling myself that there's nothing to be scared of down here *other* than Reaper. When I reach the bottom, I find him a few feet down the hall, waiting with arms crossed next to a door.

"What's down here?" I ask, eyeing the row of metal doors lining the hall that looks a little too much like jail cells. "Is this where you bring people? When you do your missions?"

"And what is it you think we do?" he asks, cocking his head to the side.

My lip pulls down into a frown. "Kidnap people for one. Kill innocent guards for another." I tilt sideways, looking past him down the dim hall. "Also stalk and organize a secret revenge plot to murder a bloodthirsty billionaire."

"You're forgetting torture, impersonation, and assassination."

My eyes widen. "Seriously?"

He chuckles darkly, then opens the door motioning for me to enter ahead of him. My hesitation has him gripping my arm and shoving me through the door. I'm not sure what I expected, but a dull room with

nothing but a scratched up wooden table with four chairs and a laptop wasn't it.

"All the espionage equipment and torture devices are in the next room," Reaper says, pulling out a chair for me to sit.

My hesitation at taking the seat he's gesturing to has nothing to do with fear, or concern over my well-being. It's because I can't tell if he's joking with me. I'm not sure what's more shocking, that he may not be, or that Reaper actually has a sense of humor.

This man, who's still, *still*, hiding his identity, who has scared the daylights out of me, chased me, spanked me, held me down on several occasions, and given me the best sex of my life after informing me I belong to him and his brothers, and I'm just now finding out he has a warped sense of humor, which makes me reexamine every single interaction I've had with him.

"Then stand," he says, leaning over to open the laptop.

It looks small in his hands, and I wonder if that's what I look like next to him. Small. Breakable. I wonder too if he's broken me. If it's going to take years of therapy to untangle the mess in my head. If I'm fixable.

That's if they let me go after I've done what they want.

If I even want to leave them.

"This is the lodge," Reaper says and my gaze darts to the laptop.

I need to focus.

This is for Cora. For the innocent people Rune's killed. For the lives that will be saved once he's stopped.

I lean forward and examine the screen. It's a blueprint of the lodge, detailing every room, every building, and the distance between them. It looks like a compound with several buildings, creating a semi-circle around a large open space. Reaper brings up another image, an aerial view of the lodge, surrounded by dense trees. I've seen photos of Rune's lodge but haven't ever been there in person. It's massive.

Reaper taps the screen over a small building detached from the main lodge, sitting a few yards away with what looks like a covered walkway attaching them. "We need in here," he says. "This is Rune's private quarters. Where he keeps everything."

My brows knit.

He taps the screen again. "The problem is gaining access."

“To his room?” I ask, questions swirling in my head. “Why don’t you just storm the place and take them all out when he plans his next visit?”

Reaper shakes his head. “We tried. It didn’t work.” He takes a deep breath. “Rune is the only person who can access his private rooms. Our source has confirmed that Rune has a security system set up that will only allow him entry and no one else.”

“What do you need me to do?” I ask, my heart hammering. Dread settles in my gut, making my stomach churn.

“We’re presented with an additional problem. If he’s not here to disarm the system, or if someone other than Rune attempts it, it will shut down and activate an emergency lock down of the entire compound.”

“He has a fail-safe in place,” I say. “Sounds like something he’d do, but why do you need to get into this building?”

“A large shipment of weapons will be delivered before his arrival, which he’ll store away in his vault.”

I back away, my eyes snapping to Reaper.

“Rune has it set up that the only weapons allowed on site are the ones he provides. After each hunt they are locked away until the members venture out again. Now that we’ve secured an invitation, we have to make sure we can access the vault containing the weapons. Weapons which will be waiting for us when we get there.”

“We?” I ask, an incredulous laugh leaving my throat. “Wait. Invitation?”

“Yes, Delilah. We.” Reaper backs away, ignoring my second question. “The only person who he’d ever allow in that room, would be someone he trusts with his life.”

I blink, staring at him.

“Harlow has been unable to access the room. He’s only seen what goes in and what comes out.”

“Wait, *Clyde*?“ I shake my head like this will make all his words settle properly in my head. “Is Clyde your source?”

He says nothing, which just confirms it.

Sinking to the seat, I drag my hands over my face. Too much swims in my head so I focus on the one thing I asked him to tell me. “I don’t understand what you need me to do.”

“We need you to get into his room, Delilah. Get access to his vault. Once we have those weapons we can take out each member and retrieve the

object.” Reaper crouches in front of me and I realize I’m staring blankly at spot on the floor. My eyes drift along his forearms draped over his thick thighs. The skull tattoos on his hands. “This is why I need you trained.” Our gazes lock. “If he suspects you, he’ll have you killed.”

“I’m his daughter,” I say weakly, but even I know that won’t stop him. Rune has spent years hurting Cora. He kills people. Hunts them. He has for years, and whatever humanity he had in him is gone. I tried to tell myself I’d be safe, but it’s a lie I didn’t want to face. He’d not think twice about removing me if he thought I was a threat.

Wait. A threat. I’m going to become a threat the second I attempt to get my hands on the weapons.

I bolt upright, my chair tumbling behind me. My heart pounds, pulse thumping in my ears. Reaper slowly unfolds himself, watching me carefully.

“If I try to get in his vault, he’s going to know,” I say, voice hoarse. My chin wobbles. My heart hammers, anger making my vision blur. Hurt making tears spring to my eyes.

I’m so fucking stupid. Of course this is what they’d want.

“You want me to kill my father,” I say, and I don’t know how it doesn’t come out as a scream. “That’s what you’ve planned all along. You can’t get to him, but I can.”

This is why Striker said he was sorry that day he took off his mask. He knows the magnitude of what they were going to ask me.

“You want me to go to the lodge, get into my father’s rooms, with him, then kill him, giving you access to the weapons so you can kill the rest of the members.”

“Not just the weapons, Kitten,” Reaper says. “There’s something else I want.”

I shake my head in disbelief. “I don’t know if I can,” I whisper. “I may want him dead, want him to hurt, but—“

The distant sound of a door slamming grabs my attention.

“Reaper!” Striker’s shout carries down the hall and then he skids to a stop in the doorway, panting. “*Fuck.*”

“What?” Reaper snarls, staking toward him.

Striker leans over, hands on his thighs, trying to catch his breath, like he sprinted across the entire mansion to get here.

Then I notice the mask in his hand.

Striker stands up, tugging the mask over his head as he says, “Fallon’s here, and he brought back-up.”

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Chapter 49

Viper

One Week Ago, November, Age 32

OUR FATHER'S IMPENDING ARRIVAL hangs over us like a black cloud. Heavy. Dark. Ominous.

My fingers curl around my mask in my hand, absently tugging at the material. We're here because we failed as much as we succeed. Sure, we got Delilah on our side, but we did more than he asked. And less too.

I lean back in the chair, stretching my legs out, wondering how the fuck we've ended up here. What began as a mission to collect intel morphed over the years into an obsession. None of us suspected when we first sat in the park that day, how our lives would slowly begin to revolve around our enemies two daughters.

Though none of us should be surprised. Least of all Father.

The fact that he kept us secluded, trained us to be a unit, provided just enough affection to keep us leashed and following his every command,

then instructed us to follow two women for four years is laughable. What did he expect? Of course we'd care. Of course we'd become fixated on them, risking the entire mission to have them for ourselves.

For all of us, because that's what we do.

We are a unit. A team. What one does, we all do.

And we all wanted the woman we were eventually told to take, train, and ruin. We wanted Cora too. That was a problem Reaper fixed. He took her. But when it came time to follow through with Fallon's orders, none of us could do it. Ruining them, training them, harming them would be like ripping each other apart. We've already lost so much.

It was time we earned something beautiful.

We're about to lose that too.

"Where is she?" Reaper barks out, storming into the library, pulling his mask over his head as he approaches. He stops in front of me, leaning down to snatch my mask from my hands and toss it at my face. His oh-so-sweet way of telling me to put it on.

Fallon, not Father is coming so we need to be in uniform.

"Which one?" I pull my mask on, not liking the tense energy coming off Reap.

He glares at me, then stalks to the window looking out like Fallon will suddenly appear before he's ready.

He hates it when father visits. He always gets tense, nearly coming apart at the seams whenever Father is here. This house has become out sanctuary, our place to rest. Our home. Something we've never had before.

Every time fallon steps foot through the door, he invades it like a virus, tainting our safe place.

"Where the fuck is Striker?" he asks, so irritated that my back straightens. I'm already miserable, guilt eating at my gut like flies, that Reaper's dark mood sets my teeth on edge.

I know why Fallon's coming and it's not to make us suffer for defying him. Or maybe it is. We kept Cora, refusing to respond to his message after he told us to prep her for the return. Instead, we fucked her and promised to protect her.

Fucking idiots.

We all know how Fallon works.

He's coming here to take her back and there's not a fucking thing we can do to stop him.

“What’s going on?” Cora’s sweet voice cuts through my thoughts, and my attention snaps to her in the doorway.

I swear my heart stops. Her red hair, and her adorable face framed with fiery ringlets, escaping her low ponytail have filled my dreams for years. She’s wearing a pretty creamy dress with little blue flowers that makes me want to cut it away from her body. Breaker loves those dresses, and I have to admit they flatter her tiny, sexy little body that looks, feels, tastes, like she was put on this planet to drive me absolutely wild. The urge to pick her up and hide her away makes my hand twitch. When her emerald green eyes meet mine, I can’t help but take in a deep breath, all the tension leaving as those eyes move over me.

Her eyes aren’t just green. Like her they’re vibrant, the color a rich hue that can only be found in my homeland. She’s just as lush, just as breathtaking as the landscape of my childhood.

Fallon thinks he removed it from me, but try as he might, he’ll never take away the memories. He may have stripped Breaker of his heritage, refusing to acknowledge it just as he did with Striker, who can barely function if his past breaks through to his present, but those rolling hills, the deep colors of damp earth and tall grass are imbedded in my soul. Scotland lives in my bones.

“There you are,” Reaper growls, jarring me from my thoughts.

He marches forward, shoulder’s bunched, his entire demeanor as sharp as a blade. The fact she doesn’t shrink back from him curls my lip into a smile. I stifle my chuckle by biting my cheek. So tiny, but that sass in her, fuck, it makes my cock hard.

Just being near her seems to calm Reaper, some that stiff feral energy leaving him the closer he gets. Reaper pulls a glove off and holds out his hand, motioning for her to come to him as he walks toward her. “Come here, Baby Girl.”

She smirks, gliding toward him, hips swaying. My chock thickens. I notice Reap’s eyes seem to glimmer. He’s not unaffected, making me wonder why he doesn’t touch her. This woman is pure lust, a sexy little vixen, designed to lure in victims and she’s ensnared us all.

When Cora reaches Reaper, he grips her at the nape of her neck and tugs her to him. Her palms land flat on his chest, a burst of air leaving her from his slight roughness.

My eyes widen. I don’t think I’m ever going to get used to seeing Reaper so… *affectionate*.

She’s so fucking small next to him. Just this tiny ball of fire, not even reaching his shoulders. When his thumb skates over her bottom lip, she melts a little, her body molding to his. Cora was wary of Reaper from the start but after last night, she seems to have tossed any apprehension now that she knows he is as possessive with her as he is with Delilah.

Hooking a finger under her chin, he tilts her head back to look in her eyes. “I am going to tell you something and it’s going to upset you.”

“So serious.” She smirks, biting her lip. “Does this upsetting news come with another spanking, big boy?”

His hand drops as he looks up at the ceiling like he’s searching for his patience, but I’d bet this entire estate he’s smiling.

I know the feeling. This woman tests in the best possible way.

Reaper grips her by the waist and lifts, her legs instantly wrapping around his hips. Even she looks surprised, her eyes growing wide, hands gripping his thick shoulders. He carries her toward the sofa beside my chair where she was fucked last night. He sets her down, dropping to a crouch in front of her.

There’s a flickering thought, stained slightly green with envy that springs to life, seeing him touch her so often and with so much ease. Growing up, outside of Hunter, no one was allowed to touch Reap. He’d shrink away or become outright volatile if we even looked like we may get close enough to brush his flesh.

Not that I blame him. Reaper’s scars aren’t just etched into his skin. They’ve been engraved into his bones.

“You know, you’re a little scary, Reaper,” Cora says bringing my thoughts back to her. “All broody with those intense black eyes.” She winks. “It’s pretty sexy.”

Reaper brushes the back of his fingers along her cheek. “And you’re beautiful, my Baby Girl.” He removes his other glove and casts me a glance. I catch the darkened dread filling those black eyes.

I think… Fuck. I think my heart isn’t going to survive this.

“Our father will be here soon,” Reaper says, setting his gloves on the sofa next to her. Cora watches his hands, a little transfixed as she skates a finger over his knuckle.

The one dedicated to Hunter.

“Father,” she says slowly, tasting the word, but then she nods like she’s just slotted a puzzle piece into place. “Why’s he coming here?”

“You know why, Baby Girl,” Reaper says, swiping a finger over her cheek.

Her brows knit. “He’s the one who gives you orders. Your father.” Those perfectly freckled cheeks flush red and I can almost see the anger, the disappointment, the absolute heartbreak as is cinches in her chest. I want to look away, it’s so unbearable to witness, but I force myself to look. We promised her.

Even if I had to send you away, I’d always come for you.

That’s what Reaper promised. That’s what *we* promised.

“He’s coming for me,” Cora says. A tear leaks down her cheek. My hands fist. I want to ruin something, but the problem is we’re causing those tears. “You promised me.”

Reaper’s head drops.

“You told me I wasn’t going back.” She wipes angrily at her cheek. Like her tears are offensive. A betrayal to her brave face.

Reaper brings his eyes back to her. “I don’t have a choice.”

Her face pinches with anger. “You told me if you’d had to let me go, you’d get me. Was that a lie too?”

He shakes his head, his shoulders drooping in defeat. But then it’s like something in him shifts. It shifts the air in of the room, turning it thick, heavy with every promise we made last night.

Reaper brings his hand up to his jaw. Hooks his thumb under the fabric of his mask. He rips it off and her eyes blow wide in shock.

Mine do too. I grip the armrests of my chair frozen in place.

“Holy sweet Jesus,” Cora breathes. Her green eyes dart over to me.

Yeah. I know.

“Listen to me, Baby Girl,” Reaper says, making her look back at him. He cups her jaw, and I swear I can feel from here how her body eases into his gentle touch. Just like she does for me. “I need you to be brave for me, okay?”

Cora nods slightly, but I think she’d agree to anything right now considering the way she’s looking at him.

Reap licks his lips and her eyes fall to his mouth. Her lips part. “I need someone on the inside. Someone strong. Someone I can trust.”

She nods again, eyes darting between his. Onyx on emerald. Dark against vibrant light.

“Do you understand?” His thumb traces her bottom lip. “I don’t want to let you go, but I have to.”

“Why?” she whispers, her body tensing again, snapping back to clarity. Another tear slips out.

Reaper swipes it away. “Can you be brave for me? Can you just trust me?”

“But, I don’t want to go back to him.” Her chin quivers. My heart cracks, my mind splintering at the sight of her pain. “You know what he’ll do to me if I go back.”

Reaper grips her shoulders. “You do not let him touch you. Do you understand me?”

More tears slip out, but our sweet girl nods. “Okay.”

“Do everything you’re told, and things will be okay,” he says, hands dropping to grasp hers. “Rune is not to touch you. No one is ever allowed to touch you ever again. You are our girl.” He brushes her fingers against his lips as a sob wracks her entire body. “You are my Baby Girl, do you understand?”

Cora’s entire face crumbles like my heart. I lean forward to grip her knee squeezing. She looks my way.

“Say it,” I tell her, desperate for her to understand.

“I’m yours.”

“If he touches you, you do everything in your power to hurt him,” Reaper says, his features contorting, agony written in every hard line. “You kick. You scream. You *hurt* him. You fight for yourself. Even if you have to kill him.“ Reaper cups her jaw and leans in, placing a light kiss to her lips. “I promise, it will be okay. We will come for you. We will not let you go. Your ours.”

When she bursts into tears, throwing her arms around his neck, I bolt from my seat needing to do something to stop this searing pain lancing through every atom. Her fear, her pain, her fucking bravery, makes me feel so small. I’ve been faced with so many terrible things in my life, things I’ve never shared with anyone, but seeing her this terrified and trying to be strong shadows the demons I’ve faced. Cora knows what it feels like to be used. Beaten. That gut wrenching feeling of having hands on you that you

never consented to. To be told your worth was between your legs and every vile thing done to your body was of your own making.

"Cora." I snatch her away from Reaper and drag her close, my need to have her near me, *hear* me, making me restless. "We will come for you. I promise on my life. We will come for you."

Her green eyes, those eyes that feel so much like home meet mine. "You promise?"

"I promise," Reaper and I say at the same time.

I kiss her forehead. Cora swipes at her cheeks. Straightens her back. Our little warrior, preparing herself for battle. I pat her back side, letting her go.

Reaper takes her hand and kisses her fingers again. "Wait in the parlor. Father will be here soon. When he arrives, do everything he commands and do not say a word."

A slow, deep intake of air and she walks from the room without looking back.

Pulling his mask back over his head, he turns my way. When Cora has left the room, Reaper reaches between my legs and grips my balls, squeezing just hard enough that I clench my teeth and put my hands up, surrendering.

"Fuck, man," I hiss.

"Do not breathe a word about this," Reaper whispers. "Not a fucking word to anyone what I said. Not Breaker. Not Striker. No one."

Okay, I hiss as he squeezes my sac tighter. I nod my head, the pain mixing with that fucked up erotic zing, curling it up with pleasure. "Fuck man. Let me go before you have a bigger problem on your hands."

Reaper releases me and steps back, still glaring with those black eyes that seem to eat the light in the room when he's pissed. I glance over my shoulder, making sure Cora can't hear us.

"Why didn't you tell her?" I ask adjusting myself. "Why we have to send her back?"

"Because then she won't fucking do anything about it," Reaper grates, lifting his chin toward the doorway. "If she goes, thinking we're going to rescue her and stop this marriage, then she won't fight it herself. We need her to find a way to stop this because we can't."

I search his eyes. All I see is determination. Anger. Passion turing his eyes somehow darker. "You're a manipulative asshole, you know that

right?”

“It’s my greatest quality,” he says, backing away.

“What about Rune?” I dread swirls in my gut. The thought of him putting his lecherous hands on our girl makes me want to hop on Breaker’s bike and slice them off and feed them to him.

Reaper swipes a hand over his mask, adjusting it at his neck. “I’ve already told Harlow to stay with her at all times.”

“But he doesn’t *know*,“ I hiss. Fuck, we didn’t know. Not really.

“I told him to watch her around him,” Reaper says, “That will keep him alert.”

“Maybe we should just tell him and let him kill Rune,” I say, really, really liking the way that thought tastes leaving my lips. “Problem solved.”

“Leaving us with more problems.” Reaper grips my shoulder, looking me in the eyes. That determined gaze is fiery now, smoldering with a lethal threat. “Viper,” Reaper says, voice low. Deadly. “Do not fucking tell Breaker I am planning to get our girl. Do you understand?”

Shit.

Breaker.

He’s going to snap. He’s going to….

My eyes drop to Reaper’s hand on my shoulder. I shake my head slowly as the realization of what Reaper wants, unfolds.

Asshole. Reaper is a manipulative asshole.

But he’s also a possessive, loyal to a fault, and loves us more than anything. He’s literally risked his life on more than one occasion to save me. Save us.

“I won’t tell him.” Now I’m the one shoving him away. My throat tightens, my pulse thumping erratically. I place a hand to my neck like this will stop the pain that’s forming, knowing that the next few weeks are going to be hard. Lonely. I’ve never been away from him for more than a few days.

We need to get Delilah ready. Fast. Before this all blows up in Reaper’s face.

Breaker is the only one Fallon will forgive. Any and all ramifications for breaking his order will land on Reaper. And just like he has our entire lives, Reaper will take the punishment meant for us, even if it leaves him with more scars.

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Chapter 50

Delilah

THE *clack clack, clack* of Fallon's footsteps thunder inside my head as he paces the room. A vaporous darkness seems to emanate from him, like his anger is thickening the air, turning it acrid. His three-piece suit a solid black-on-black and silver hair a contrast of light and dark, adding to his lethal aura.

"Is she still willing to cooperate?" Fallon asks, slowing his methodical pacing in front of Reaper and Striker. They're both at attention, hands fisted their sides, not moving an inch.

We gathered in the large parlor opposite the library. It was big enough to hold all of us.

Because Fallon didn't come alone.

Ten soldiers, much like Reaper and Striker, stand in the far right of the room, blocking the exit. They are dressed in all black—gloves, uniforms, masks—but they wear helmets and vests, with several guns and knives strapped to their belts, all of the men fully geared up and standing at the ready.

For what, I'm not sure, and that unknown makes my heart race.

The tension in the air is so thick, it feels like a heavy cloak, weighing me down. Fear stained with anger keeps me rooted in place, as I watch Fallon take turns glaring at Striker and Reaper, but it doesn't stop me from saying, "Being I'm right behind you, you could simply ask me if I'm willing to cooperate."

With the exception of a light twitch to his head, their father ignores me.

“You made it sound as if she was trained, son,” Fallon says, stopping in front of Reaper. A long, thin finger grazes over Reaper’s chest, smoothing the wrinkle in his shirt. Fallon tugs at Reaper’s mask like he’s inspecting his uniform, then taps his bare hand, taking note of his lack of gloves. When he shifts to stand before Striker, my stomach dips. Thankfully Striker’s in his black uniform, but he’s missing his gloves as well. Fallon pats his shoulder and lets his hand drop. “The woman behind me lacks in manners and discipline.”

“She is trained, sir,” Reaper says. “Delilah is prepared to continue with the mission.”

The urge to snap at him, tell him to fuck right off, that I’m not capable of killing my father, or anyone else for that matter, eats at my throat, but I bite back the words.

These men who are so strong and unified, a terrifying force to be reckoned with, are letting this man, their father, command them. Their father’s control over them is baffling, but there, nonetheless. I witnessed it first hand when he subdued Viper.

Viper.

Where the *fuck* is Viper?

“I’ve been made aware that your form of training—“ Fallon pauses, clasping his hands together behind his back as he looks toward the ceiling, ”—is rather unusual.”

Striker’s chest expands as he inhales.

“I can see none of the training technics I taught you have been implemented,” Fallon says, shifting slightly to look my way. “If they had been, the girl would know her place and not speak out of turn.”

My place.

That urge to scream returns but he’s wrong. I have been taught. I know how to deal with men like him and it’s not by mouthing off or showing my anger. So, I remain silent. Waiting, just like my father taught me.

“Did I not train my sons how to take control of their target?” Fallon gestures to me. “She doesn’t seem very controlled.”

Unease claws at the back of my neck.

“Tell me, Reaper, how have you managed to gain her submission?” he asks, voice growing colder with each word. “With your cock? Did you drive your control over her home every time you fucked her?”

The crass way he says it makes my cheeks burn. My hand presses to my face, feeling the hot anger and humiliation.

“Does Rune Gavin’s daughter feel like redemption when you sink into her cunt?”

My eyes drop to my feet, breaths coming out ragged. My hands grip my dress, hating that he’s making me feel so worthless.

“Does she whimper? Or cry out?” Fallon steps in closer, angling his head so he’s in Reaper’s face. The black eyes behind the melting skull stare straight ahead. “Is she willing? Or do you cover her mouth to stifle her screams and fuck her like the whore she is.”

“That’s *enough*,“ Striker barks, stepping forward.

The second Fallon chuckles, Striker’s hands flex and he resumes his position. There’s a power play happening here, some sort of struggle to find control, and the men are losing. I’m not stupid enough to get in the middle of it, so I keep quiet, trying not to let his words affect me.

Though they do. Because as upset as I am at the realization of what Reaper told me I’m expected to do, I don’t think they want to ask this of me. I know they want their revenge for their brother. I know they want Rune stopped. I also know they don’t want me harmed.

None of their promises were a manipulation to get my corporation like I was feared. I feel the truth in every touch. Breaker told me that night. They fucked up.

They weren’t supposed to care that I cried.

And Fallon just reminded them of their failure.

Ours to do with as we please. Like I was just a tool. A means to exact revenge.

Except they didn’t use me to do with as they pleased. Their father never gave them the order to meet us in Rune’s club that night. They did that on their own. They did because they wanted us.

They’ve wanted us to be theirs, to be with them, accept them, crave them, need them, this entire time. Now I do. And watching this cold, cruel man belittle them, cuts as sharply as a razor.

“And it seems not only have my sons forgotten their training, they’ve forgotten how to take an order.” Fallon turns to face me. My blood chills

when his icy eyes land on my face. The color is so much like Breaker's it's uncanny. "Did they tell you what happens when an order is ignored?"

My teeth grind, and I keep my eyes locked on his, refusing to answer.

Adjusting his tie, he nods, like I've just confirmed something for him. "See, Delilah, I made a mistake with my sons, just as they've made a mistake with you." Fallon takes a step toward me, the heel of his black shoe *clicking* hard on the wood floor, the noise so harsh and I'm so tense it cuts through me too. It takes every ounce of strength to remain still. I tilt my ankle, instinctively feeling for the little knife I stole from Viper but I'm not wearing my boots. I don't have my knife at all.

I haven't needed my knife because I haven't been scared. The men don't scare me. Not like that.

Their father does though.

Shit. Where is Viper?

"I believed if I took young boys, and trained them the way I had been, I'd ensure that I had perfect soldiers. But, I made one change. I thought if I gave them love, treated them as my sons, they'd follow me, respect me, love me enough to follow my every command."

The words leave my mouth before I can think. "Is that what's wrong with you? Your mommy didn't love you enough?"

Fallon chuckles. It rolls out of him so stained with darkness it reminds me of Reaper. A cruel smile slices across his face. Then he's a blur of movement, and pain erupts on my cheek. I stumble back from the impact, my hand flying to my face, eyes watering, nose stinging. Shock making me gasp.

He just *hit* me.

My angry snarl is muffled by a flurry of noise. Reaper and Striker both explode into movement, animalistic growls rumbling from them as they break their perfect stance and bolt forward.

The line of soldiers to our right march toward them. Reaper punches one, then kicks another, and then his hands are on me, shoving me behind his back.

"You lay another hand on her and I'll fucking *gut* you," Reaper growls. The violence in his words grate though him, moving into my stinging cheek pressed to his back. I fist his shirt, breathing hard, fear making my knees weak.

“Gut me?” Fallon hisses, words snaking from his lips poisoned with rage. “My son threatens me?”

I was raised around violence, but it rarely touched me. Right now, the room pulses with it, and I cling to Reaper letting him put himself between the raging storm and me.

Striker moves in beside him blocking me from Fallon’s view as he brushes a hand over my back like he’s reassuring himself I’m there, safe. I flash on the day they took me. How my father and Clyde created a wall to protect Cora and me from these men and now they’re the ones protecting me.

“There is no need for this,” Striker says, letting me go. He straightens his back, squaring his shoulders. “We have her cooperation. We have it under control.”

“Control?” Fallon’s voice dips low. Deadly. “Fucking her is maintaining control? Breaker leaving and setting this mission into motion, is *control*?”

Reaper’s hand tightens on my hip, and I move in closer, molding my body to his. The manic rage in Fallon’s voice makes my skin prick with fear.

“And where is Viper?” Fallon asks. “Did yet another of my sons defy an order?”

My heart leaps. I grip Reaper’s shirt, pressing my cheek harder into his back, tears stinging my eyes.

Viper went to her.

Emotions clog my throat. They’re doing exactly as they promised. They promised us we were theirs. That they’d always come for us. Even if they had to send her away, they’d never let her go.

“You’ve lost control of this entire mission,” Fallon says. I can’t see him, but I hear the change in his voice. “Take her.”

Boots thud in unison against the wood floor. Reaper shoves me back, and I stumble, landing on my ass. Just as one of the black-clad soldiers reaches him, Reaper swings, catching him in the chin. Next to him, Striker shouts, hooking an arm around another soldier’s neck and slamming him down, but there’s too many soldiers and only two of them.

“Stop!” I scream, as one of the men kick Striker’s feet out from under him and he lands hard on his stomach, arms bent at an odd angle behind his back. One jabs a boot at the back of Reaper’s knee, and he goes

down, one soldier gripping one arm, another holding his other, until he's kneeling.

Fallon stalks forward as I scramble to my feet, but two of the other men grab me under my arms, dragging me until we stop in front of Reaper and Striker.

"Father," Striker says, voice low, sounding strangely like a plea.

My eyes meet Reaper's, and I see the stormy chaos swirling in them. See the subtle shake of his head. How his chest heaves and for the first time since I laid eyes on him, he doesn't look arrogant, or powerful. He isn't commanding the room and the very air in it.

Fallon is.

I still, no longer fighting, but the two solders keep me between them, their hard grip on my biceps a reminder I'm utterly helpless.

Fallon stalks forward until he's between us, his body angled so not to block me from their view. He grips Reaper's jaw. Even from several feet away I see him flinch. "You lost control the second you touched the enemies daughter."

He releases Reaper, shoving him back as he does. He pins me with a glare. "Loyalty. Courage. Duty. Honor. Discipline. *Respect*." The last words leave him like a hiss. "That's what I taught my sons. Respect for themselves, for each other. For *me*."

Terror snakes a path down my spine. Fallon steps toward me and I shrink back, but the soldiers on either side keep my locked in place, grips tightening.

"She is quite beautiful," he says, cupping my jaw. I jerk back, his skin scalding me with his evil.

"Don't fucking touch me," I snarl, unable to stop myself.

He shakes his head. "I'm afraid this lesson will hurt me the most."

"Father," Striker snaps, his voice rising sharply as he struggles to free himself. "She has done nothing wrong."

Fallon turns, marching toward Striker. He leans down, so he's face to face with him. Striker flinches. "What one does, you all do." He stands upright slowly, gesturing to the men holding me.

Before I can protest, one has my sweater in a tight grip and shoves it down my shoulders, pulling my arms free. I stumble forward, but they grasp my wrists yanking my arms up, until they're outstretched. I jerk, trying to

move my arms but they just pull harder. I wince, holding back a shriek of a pain.

"It's my fault," Reaper says. My gaze snaps to him. His chest moves, like he's dragging air into his lungs, but he's deadly still, eyes tracking Fallon as he moves toward me. "I am in charge of this mission. It's my failure, and my lesson to learn."

"Have I taught you nothing?" Fallon's voice booms though the room. "This lesson is for *all* my sons."

"I'll do it," Striker says. "I'm just as much to blame."

Fallon points at him. "You've already proven you don't have the stomach for this."

"I'll do it," Reaper says, but it's like every word is ripped from him. "I'll *fucking* do it."

Fallon marches toward and for a moment, I think he's going to strike him, but he stops, and instead of hitting him, Fallon unbuckles his belt and pulls it free, the sound of the leather slipping through the belt loops snapping thought the space. "You don't think I didn't see?" He shouts. "How you look at her? How you *touch* her? Boy who can't stand living in his own skin, has it bad for the daughter of the man who murdered his brother."

Fallon gestures to one of the silent soldiers and he stalks forward, pulling a knife from its sheath. When he nears me, I shrink back, but he marches behind me. I twist, trying to see over my shoulder, terror gripping my stomach in fist. The back of my dress tugs away from my body and I *feel* the knife slice through the dress, the whispering sound of the blade slicing through fabric, tearing through me.

There's a snarled curse then movement. Reaper shoulders the man to his right and Striker kicks behind him, but the sounds of them struggling is cut off with the distinct click of a safety being released.

I recognize the sound now.

"It appears my son has forgotten his place."

The soldiers holding Striker down, drag him up to his knees, the gun pressed to the back of his head. A clear warning not to fight. He stays still but his eyes flare with trembling rage and absolute terror.

"Don't make me do it, Reaper," Fallon says. "All I have to do is give the order and your *favorite* brother dies."

Reaper’s entire body goes rigid, his only movement the slow, ragged breaths making his chest heave. He closes his eyes briefly, like he’s trying to calm himself and when they open, he pins them on me.

Fury and fear eat at my gut. I don’t know what’s happening, but I keep my eyes on Reaper, only letting them drift to Striker long enough to see he’s completely still. I clamp my mouth shut, too terrified to say or do the wrong thing and anger Fallon even more.

He pats Reaper’s masked cheek. “Good boy. I knew you didn’t want any more deaths on your hands.”

Fallon faces me, belt dragging on the floor as he stalks my way. Fear eats up my middle, clawing at my throat when he stops before me, so close I have to tilt my head back to see his cold, dead eyes. “When you disobey an order there are consequences. You are a unit. What one does, you all do. If one of you breaks and order, defies a command, *fucks* up a mission, you all must learn from your mistake.”

His fingers brush over my cheek where he struck me. Bile rises in my throat. He’s absolutely terrifying. The softness of his voice contradicts his violent actions, and the gentle caress of his hand makes my heart thrash against my ribcage like a terrified, trapped bird, desperate to escape.

“Beautiful, beautiful girl,” he says gently, stroking my cheek. “With bright eyes and delicate skin. We’re going to turn you into a fierce soldier.” Another gentle stroke. “We’ll make you strong. We’ll remove this weakness in you. You’ll know your place. We’ll harden this delicate skin and turn you into a perfect weapon.”

His lips brush my forehead, and a shivery fear makes my body tremble.

“He’s not even going to see you coming,” Fallon says, every word laced with malice. He steps back, walking behind me, and I feel his eyes on my skin, moving over me like a predator, settling on my bare back. “Count my sons. One for every time you’ve failed me.”

My chest heaves.

Lesson.

Lesson.

Lesson.

I suck in a breath, my stomach knotting. I jerk sideways as understanding floods me.

When you disobey an order there are consequences.

I’m about to suffer the consequences, except this lesson isn’t for me.

“Father please!” Striker’s scream is cut off by the sharp sound of leather hitting bare flesh. The sound registers before the pain, but when it does it slices through me so cruelly, my knees give.

A breath sucks in, back bowing.

The soldiers stretch my arms out, pulling them taunt keeping me upright.

I hear my name, but then the belt lands again across my back and I hear, feel, exist in nothing but an agonizing burn. Then there’s another, then another.

My eyes drag to Reaper. His own close but then they open, fixing on mine.

The next hit lands so harshly I bite my lip to stop the scream from ripping free, refusing to give him the satisfaction of making a sound. Coopery warmth hits my tongue.

“You’re not counting,” Fallon yells.

No, no, no. This is not their fault. They aren’t monsters like him. Striker is my soft and strong safe place. His affection is blazing heat and heart and scary precision. Reaper is my cold, but passionate shadow. My violence and revenge.

He will not make them a part of this.

“Six,” I hiss, and I swear if it weren’t for the soldiers holding Reaper up, he’d crumble. “Seven,” I scream as another lands. My gaze flickers to Striker. His shoulders slump and he drops, leaning back on his heels. The gold of his eyes are molten with rage. Highlighted with pain. “Eight.” My knees give.

The belt drops to the floor with a loud *thud* and my head is jerked back. Fallon’s hot breath hits my face, looming over me like a vile monster. The soldiers release me, and he shoves me to my knees. I fall forward, agony tugging the skin on my back.

The shiny tip of his shoe hits my ribs. Pain explodes in my bones, my marrow, stealing my breath. I cry out but it’s caught on that pain lacing around my ribs and I curl into a ball.

“She better be worth it,” he says.

The rhythmic thud of boots hitting wood in perfect unison as the soldiers file out are the last thing I hear before the searing pain and mind numbing fear take over and I burst into tears.

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Viper

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Acknowledgments

Remember when I said Striker's book was the hardest I'd written?

Breaker wins, hands down as the most difficult book I've ever written.

While I loved writing this book, I also hated it. When I started Breaker's book, I had an entire trope in mind but when I sat down to actually write none of it worked. Breaker's book is so tangled up with the next book, that I rewrote most chapters two times to fit the constant changes that I was forced to make. Almost every single chapter in this book was written twice since I kept writing scene after scene that was happening too early.

So don't worry, we're going to get more of him soon…

When I wrote Striker, his trauma broke my heart.

Breaker has wrecked me in the best and worst way. I loved his realistic inner dialog, his morals, and lack thereof. His absolute love and devotion. How he flings himself into things to protect.

This book broke my heart. It hit so close to home in many ways, examining trauma bonds and relationships with people who have power over us. Breaker's story came during a time in my life that I was breaking bonds, breaking old behaviors, determined to come out the other side a new person. In all honesty, my life was complete chaos when I wrote this book and if it wasn't for the support of my close friends and my partner, this book would have never been completed in time.

Thank you to my trusted beta readers. I am utterly lost without you. You all went nuts over Breaker, giving me hope that readers would too.

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TK… You made me cry. That is all.

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Thank you all.

Oh…

And Breaker. Thank you for reminding me it's okay to be harsh and fight back to protect yourself.

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About the Author

Finding Strength in Love

Steamy romantic suspense author and lover of all things romance.

Meet Fanny Lee Savage, the bestselling romance author known for her suspenseful and steamy stories of characters overcoming trauma and hardships. In her novels, she explores the resilience of the human spirit and the power of love to heal even the deepest wounds.

In the *Guardian Series*, a paranormal romance with a set in modern times, Ms. Savage combines her love of ancient history and folklore to create a dark new world. Her action-packed *Playhouse Series* immerses readers into the underworld of Miami and the inner workings of the modern-day mob. Her novels are full of sensual romance, dark humor, and edge of your seat suspense.

If you're looking for a romantic read that will make you laugh, cry, and fall in love, Ms. Savages' books are for you. Every story is full of sensual (steamy) romance, and characters that struggle with finding the courage to move forward and fight for themselves. With her powerful storytelling, she'll take you on an emotional journey that will stay with you long after you've turned the last page.

Don't forget to leave a review! Leaving a review tells other readers what you loved (or didn't) about a book. Remember that *all* reviews are important. Remember to share *your* experience with all books you read. Doing so will help others find books they may enjoy.

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